

ARCTIC SOJOURN:

A Teacher's Reflections

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ABSTRACT

The research describes the experience of a southern white teacher who lived and worked in a remote community in Canada's Far North.

The impact of physical relocation and culture shock are discussed, as well as problems encountered when conflicting views of education and life goals meet in a cross-cultural setting. The thesis explores some of the difficulties facing mainstream teachers of Indigenous students when issues of past colonialism and present injustices come into play.

Inuit community literacies (visual, kinesic and oral traditions) are explored and contrasted with traditional definitions of literacy, which center on the paramount importance of the printed word. Power issues are discussed, including the role played by literacy education in maintaining control in the hands of the dominant culture.

The research is qualitative and phenomenological in nature. The teaching experience is viewed through a critical lens, and attempts to better understand the writer's southern white middle-class background as it relates to differing worldviews. The author recounts the process of re-examining assumptions of her own culture, and describes her personal and professional journey of coming to grips with its impact on her teaching.

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* I am deeply grateful to the Inuit community in which I lived and worked for their patience and willingness to share with this sometimes ignorant newcomer. It was their welcoming openness that enabled me to "sit around the kulliq"¹ so to speak, and learn of their culture, and also my own.

* Most of all, I am thankful to my family – Cam, Joel, Kristel and Ryan – who permitted me to embark on such a sojourn in the first place, and whose support and encouragement have fuelled the sometimes difficult journey.

¹"Lighting a kulliq [traditional soapstone lamp] is a symbol of passing on knowledge from one generation to the next or from one culture to another" (Hancock, 1995, p.63).

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INTRODUCTION

Twenty-four hours... They needed my decision within that time frame. A day to make choices that would impact me and my entire family for a year. Would I abandon those I loved and take up residence in the far North, leave behind my grad studies and live in a remote community in frigid cold and total darkness?

The salary would be nice... Years of music lessons for the kids had drained our reserve dry. Yet financial reasons alone were not enough to permit this kind of adventure, requiring sacrifice and hardship of us all. But here lay an opportunity to live and teach amongst an ancient people - people I knew relatively nothing about, but who had roamed Canada long before European contact.

There would be many things to learn from such an experience, but the cold ... What of it? I was a hardy prairie girl, born and bred amidst the fierce snows of the Canadian West. Just bundle up a bit more and I'd be OK. The loneliness - yes, there would be plenty of that. Yet I'd experienced that, too. Growing up as an only child with extended family a world away across the Atlantic, I had known the meaning of feeling isolated and alone. Besides, this wouldn't be forever. I'd be back home before you knew it.

There would also be the opportunity to grow professionally. I would doubtless be a better teacher as a result. (Maybe more employable, too? Perhaps with this year of new experience behind me, future employers might cast a longer glance at my resume...) But special needs education? I had had no training in this field. All I knew was the common sense inclinations of a mother and classroom teacher. What did I know of "special" education and the theories and practices it encompassed? Well, I was willing to learn and ready to work hard. Apparently that was enough for the Nunavut school that had so hastily interviewed me over the phone. [They're obviously desperate.]

Graduate studies had opened my eyes to a new world of ideas - teaching outside the comfortable, the familiar. This, however, was all I had known as a student in undergraduate studies 20 years earlier, and through private and classroom teaching in Alberta. Now, it appeared, I was on the threshold of a world that would challenge past conceptions about learning and teaching, with world views and values that were foreign to me. The Indigenous peoples of Canada and their unique ways of looking at the world posed an unfamiliar and somewhat threatening challenge to my professional efforts. Could I adapt sufficiently, become

retrained and teach in such a setting? This year in the North might prove to be a personal testing ground and opportunity for learning anew what it means to teach...

Then, of course, there was my family. Could they survive a year without their wife/mother/chauffeur/secretary/laundrer? [Surely they would be permanently scarred by my prolonged absence?!] They seemed willing to try. My 15 year-old daughter put it well: "Sounds exciting, Mom. And it's your turn. Go for it!" Indeed, we had followed Dad around the countryside in the past, as his jobs and pursuit of degrees took him hither and yon. What of my aging mother back in Alberta? It seemed her constant concern was for our physical safety and warmth ... How would she deal with my being perched on an iceberg for almost a year? She'd never go for it... She did. My excuses were gradually diminishing, I had the support of those who mattered most, it was practical financially and professionally, and I was eager to learn something of this mysterious part of my country. I decided to give it a try.

"Just how far is it? I have to be there in how many days?? Not possible! I'm in the midst of a summer course with exams and papers... I'll be there."

Within 10 days I had arrived at my new home. Somehow the requirements for my studies had been completed, my belongings packed and shipped (What do you bring on such an excursion?), and I was off. There I sat on a Sunday evening in early August 1999, wondering just what I had gotten myself into...

And so began a new chapter in my life. Now some years later, I pause and reflect again on the events of that year. In so doing, I realize many issues were raised and many puzzles unearthed. In my months perched high above the Arctic Circle, I had my views on Aboriginal education expanded and I was forced to take a long, hard look at the culture I call my own. Immersed in another way of life and removed from the milieu I call home, I had the opportunity to glimpse life through the lens of Inuit values, and to critique southern viewpoints I had previously taken for granted.

Knowing this was to be an adventure confined to one year, I packed light, bringing only the essentials to get me by so far from family and home. It soon became apparent, however, that I had brought with me more than kitchen utensils and bedding: my centric perspective had made the trip with me.

As a child I had grown up in a middle-class European immigrant family where hard work and education were highly valued. Through these means, anyone (it was assumed) could carve out a better life for themselves. Literacy skills in particular were valued; if you couldn't read proficiently you were relegated to low-paying, unsatisfying jobs, with little chance for advancement. Education was the key to personal success and financial gain.

With 20 years' experience in parenting, I had definite views on child-rearing and the kind of education that was best for children: enveloped in a nurturing environment, children needed to acquire certain skills (intellectual, social, emotional and spiritual) to lead a well-balanced life. These methods had "worked" for my own kids – surely other people's children would respond similarly.

Having taught both privately and within the public education system, the acquisition of skills was always a high priority for education. During my years as a private music teacher, parents sent their children to my studio to learn musical skills; in the period of time I taught in the Alberta public educational system, government exams demanded teacher accountability by regularly measuring student progress. I readily complied with these expectations, and sought to do my best to foster learning for the students in my charge.

Confronted with new educational ideas and methods in the North, my WASP mindset was not to go unchallenged, and there were numerous occasions when I felt distinctly at odds with my new Arctic environment. As a Kooblanaq² newcomer, my journey to meaning-making was lined with many baffling markers. In addition to the more mundane questions that occupied my mind at times (How can a school run without a functioning photocopier? Is it possible to teach math without pencils or texts? How can I manage without a haircut for 10 months?), I encountered more troublesome questions along the way, whose answers were elusive. Through this study I have sought to gain further understanding into some of the complex issues that came to my critical consciousness during my Arctic sojourn.

RESEARCH QUESTION:

What is the essence of teaching in the cross-cultural setting of an Inuit hamlet in northern Canada?

²*Kooblanaq*: an Inuktitut term used to describe a non-Inuk person.

What can be learned from this experience about my own culture, my teaching style(s) and preferences, and my personal life journey? As an educator, how do I deal with and incorporate this new information?

SIGNIFICANCE OF THE RESEARCH:

This study has held enormous personal significance in the quest for a clearer understanding of my self and my culture. Coming to terms with my role within a colonizing nation is enabling me to become a wiser, more compassionate citizen in today's world. As a teaching professional, the research process and findings have better equipped me to deal with diversity both inside and outside the classroom, and afforded an increased appreciation of Aboriginal struggles with the white educational system.

In an age of increasing ease of mobility, significant numbers of teachers find themselves expanding their professional horizons beyond their home environment. With a world seemingly shrinking through advances in technology, opportunities for travel and teaching experience in foreign lands are becoming commonplace. While a great deal of thought is often required as to the practicalities of physical relocation, there is many times insufficient preparation for the crossing of cultural borders that ensues. Although such educational adventures are often temporary in nature (as was mine), there is nonetheless a great benefit to examining the dynamic this brings into the classroom. Hopefully my experience will enable others to bring a more culturally sensitive approach to their teaching and provide more meaningful learning

opportunities to students whose cultural background differs from that of the teacher.

Even without the element of travel there is much cultural boundary-crossing that occurs in today's schools. As the face of Canadian demographics continues to change through immigration and a burgeoning Aboriginal population, mainstream classrooms will increasingly reflect a mosaic of cultural and linguistic diversity. Both teachers and students may find themselves "far from home" when encountering others whose view of education and the world in general differ from their own. As teachers, it is our mandate to foster a climate of mutual respect and understanding of one another's cultures, to expand teaching repertoire which values the many ways of knowing that are distributed (yet often unrecognized) throughout the human population, and thus offer students alternate avenues of learning.

My research presents only one small slice of reality as I experienced it: it is not generalizable to society at large, other than reflecting the need for each person to come to grips with his/her history and how present social practices impact those separate from the dominant culture. It is my hope that this study will provide added insight and impetus for other teachers seeking change and the best possible learning environment for all students within the classroom.

METHODOLOGY

NATURE OF THE RESEARCH:

The research study is qualitative in nature, based on the assumption that there is no single reality but rather many facets or layers of truth. Qualitative methods endeavour to place the subject of study within a context, and emphasize the “value-laden nature of inquiry” (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994, p. 8). As objectivity is never attainable, multiple realities are explored and readers are left to interact with the text and come to their own conclusions.

Autoethnography is one form of qualitative research which centres around the experiences of the “self,” although authors do not agree as to its exact nature. Deck (1990), Lejeune (1989) and Hayano (1979) hold that the writer should be the indigenous, native expert, rather than an outsider to the culture³. Pratt (1991) views autoethnographic texts as the voices of the marginalized responding to and critiquing issues of politics and power. These definitions, however, are not the basis of my research writing. I entered the Arctic as an outsider and, although I remained within the community for the better part of a year, I did not assume the emic or insider’s point of view of the Inuit culture.

For Van Maanen (1995), however, autoethnography involves the study of

³Such writing has also been termed “Native Ethnography” (Ellis & Bochner, 1996).

one's own culture with the ethnographer becoming the "native." This genre of writing provides the opportunity for reflection and introspection, for gaining a critical perspective on the everyday occurrences of life (Fiske, 1990), and for resituating the self within a cultural context (Reed-Danahay, 1997). It is this last view of autoethnography which gives shape to this study.

The overarching aim of autoethnographical writing is to bring about an understanding of oneself and one's culture "through the detour of the Other" (Cole, 1992, p. 114), as well as the reverse: understanding others through increased awareness of self (Ellis & Bochner, 1996). It is an expression of "the complexities and difficulties of coping and feeling resolved, showing how we changed over time as we struggled to make sense of our experience" (p. 748).

Autoethnographic text is the writing of boundary crossers, the reflections of those who live between two worlds and who are never really "at home" (Reed-Danahay, 1997; Neumann, 1996). "Their accounts show how we mark and cross those lines, carrying back artifacts and stories to collect ourselves as we seek to understand the dialectics of self and culture" (Neumann, 1996, p. 195). In many ways my year in the North was a sojourn between worlds: caught between the mainstream and the culture of contemporary Inuit people, it reflects the struggles of being far from home physically, emotionally and culturally. At the same time it confronts and forces me to grapple with the aspects of my own culture previously unnoticed or unexamined.

My written reflections take on a form whose parameters are somewhat

blurred. Sharing elements of both critical autoethnography and phenomenology, my thesis seeks to bring meaning to an intensive personal and professional lived experience.

The benefits resulting from phenomenological research do not concern what we can do with *it*, but what it does to *us* as authors and readers: how our experience parallels that of others, and how we are altered and transformed as a result of re-viewing and re-cognizing our experiences (Van Manen, 1997). The aim of phenomenological study is not to problem-solve, but rather to more fully understand that which is hidden and thereby enable more thoughtful action in the future.

The study of lived experience (phenomenology) cannot be understood while it is being experienced, but only retrospectively. Through the process of reflective writing we are distanced from the moment and thus able to assume a more critical viewpoint, allowing us to recognize in hindsight the nature of the experience. The task of phenomenological writing, then, is to reveal the *essence* of such lived experience and enable the author to grasp its hidden significance. Such studies do not occur merely in answer to an academic query; rather, they tend to absorb the researcher, who “lives” the question while engaging in the ongoing pursuit of meaning (Van Manen, 1997).

Anecdote is a common device in phenomenological writing used “to make comprehensible some notion that easily eludes us” (p. 116). In the same way stories and poetry can be a tool for uncovering meaning hidden amidst the multiple layers of daily life. Narrative presses the reader to find a relationship between the theoretical

and the practical business of living from one day to the next. It is a vehicle that compels our attention as readers, involves us personally, and causes us to reflect (Rosen, 1986, cited in Van Manen, 1997).

I have employed journalling and poetry as vehicles for reflectively re-entering the world I experienced in the North. In this way I hope to provide the reader with a means of vicariously observing and experiencing the year, while at the same time having the opportunity to critically examine with me some underlying assumptions and viewpoints.

My work is presented in the “x-paper” format⁴ in which I have incorporated three related topics under the overarching subject of teaching in the Arctic. Although separately explored, they relate directly to the main theme; together they help to illuminate what is entailed in living and working within another culture. In effect, the thesis takes on the format of an edited book, approaching the main subject area from various angles. The text is polyphonic in nature, characterized by two voices: 1) the narrator’s critical voice, and 2) the retrospective voice of the teacher I was in that particular context.

Although there was no formal entry point or visa required to enter into another culture, there was nonetheless a very tangible change in views and “lifeworld” that greeted this traveller. I have chosen three points of crossing at which I became keenly aware of a rift between the familiar and my new setting: (1) On the

⁴ See “Thesis Format Guidelines, Interdisciplinary Program”, U of S Graduate Studies

Road to Another Way of Life; (2) Alternate Aims in Education; and (3) Changing Views of Literacy. Each of these themes will be addressed in a chapter of its own.

POSITIONALITY OF THE RESEARCHER:

I am a white, middle-aged Anglophone female, a mother, wife and daughter, and a teacher trained in the Canadian West. I come from a position of privilege, from society's urban middle-class, and as such a member of the culture of power. My upbringing has been steeped in the belief that education is of paramount importance – literacy in particular – as modelled by my immigrant parents. I am a Christian for whom God and the church are central to life. As a pastor's wife for many years and subsequently wife of a seminary professor, our lives have been intimately related to the Christian church and its ideals, besmirched as it is with faults and the travesties of justice it has played out through history.

In many ways I led an insulated, protected life, having experienced cross-cultural education neither as student nor teacher. It is somewhat embarrassing to admit that I had never been to a First Nations reserve, though there were several surrounding the Edmonton area where I lived.

I entered the Inuit community as an outsider from the South and stayed for a relatively short period of time. One of many non-Inuit who came and went, I was nonetheless welcomed by the community and warmly received into their circle. However, being thrust suddenly into a situation where I was in the minority – the outsider, the intruder – served as an opportunity for reflection. The long, lonely

winter nights of the Arctic certainly provided ample time for such inner scrutiny, and coupled with readings from graduate studies and my immersion course in Inuit lifestyle, I had plenty to occupy my thoughts throughout my 10-month stay. Despite real attempts at objectivity and seeking the frame of reference of my host culture, my observations are nonetheless coloured by my own mindset, marking me forever as a “Kooblanaq”.

Although limited in scope, this study seeks to present a valid portrayal of one particular experience of teaching in an unfamiliar culture, hopefully offering insight into teacher education, behaviour and expectations for others in cross-cultural educational settings. The study will be an accounting of lessons learned, both personal and professional, from the drama of my lived experience in the Far North of Canada.

SETTING:

My Nunavut teaching experience occurred between July 1999 and June 2000 in a small community in Canada’s Arctic. The hamlet consisted of approximately 600 people, 92% of whom were Inuit (Nortext Multimedia, 1997). The remaining 8% were Southerners (many originating from Canada’s Maritimes), who had flown into the community in conjunction with their work: hamlet officers, retail workers, RCMP, nurses, dental therapist, social workers and teachers. Their stay ranged in duration from a few days to several years, with the occasional merging of the two cultures through marriage of Southerner and Inuk.

The key informant in research was myself in relation to my surroundings: students, parents, school staff (both professional and support), the community at large, and the vast Arctic tundra. My teaching assignment consisted of being Program Support Teacher for the only school in the hamlet, having an enrollment of approximately 250 students from Kindergarten to Grade 12. The job description centred on teaching special needs children via reading support groups, and one-on-one teaching of students with a variety of needs ranging from hearing impairment to Fetal Alcohol Effects to Down's Syndrome. In addition I served as support for all teachers in the school, with particular involvement in primary through junior high classrooms.

Observation took place in a naturalistic manner, i.e. in its natural context in the rhythm of daily events. Research was inductive in character, as data, rather than a hypothesis, drove the study. Artifacts were collected through unobtrusive observation of the community and landscape via my constant snapping of pictures. Observation sites and participants included classrooms, student cluster groups, the staffroom, hallways, "the land" and its impact on the community, and the interplay between Inuit and non-Inuit residents and teaching staff. Serving as a springboard to my reflection were various artifacts gathered during my stay: personal and professional journaling, photographs, memorabilia, letters and e-mail correspondence, ethnopoetry, as well as official documents from the Board of Education. Analysis involved document examination, reflection, reconciling literature to experience, searching for emerging themes and probing for underlying meaning.

THE JOURNALLING PROCESS:

“We write to plan, to remember, to schedule, to arrange, and to correspond, but more fundamentally, we write to survive” (Calkins, 1991, p. 106). Grundtvig, a prolific writer, once stated that he attempted to write his way to clarity (Thaning, 1972). Writing provides not only a way to re-live past events, but is also a means to making sense of one’s experiences, a process of discovery (Murray, 1998).

The process of journalling while in Nunavut was not initiated to provide field notes for research but to serve as a means of recalling and reflecting, of finding meaning in my often unsettling experience. My writing in the Arctic flowed out of a desire: 1) to visibly mark the passage of time. With each page I wrote, I imagined myself one page, one day closer to the time when I would return home. As such it served as a countdown calendar; 2) to try to make sense of what was occurring around me. Immersed in a culture that was foreign, I had a lot to work out, to “get my mind around,” both in the field of education and the broader arena of daily life. Writing gave expression to questions and perhaps even a few insights; 3) to serve as a permanent reminder of my time perched on the top of the world. Though there were many struggles, I was keenly aware that my days were numbered in this fascinating environment, and that I was fortunate indeed to have had the opportunity to experience this slice of life.

My journalling served, in addition to phone calls home, as my main source of therapy, of reconciling the strangeness that surrounded me with the world I had known. The pages of my journal welcomed my pitiful attempts at drawing and the

disjointed thoughts penned in the early stages of poetry. Within its pages I had the freedom to explore my thoughts, my surroundings, my biases and fears. As a result my remarks are candid as words flowed from my pen without fear of censorship.

The impulse to narrativize -- to tell one's story -- often follows an intensive experience "where there has been a breach between ideal and real, self and society" (Riessman, 1993, p. 3). My Nunavut experience forced me into a space where conflicting messages demanded my attention. Indeed there had been a breach between my ideal -- peoples peacefully coexisting with power for self-determination equally accessible by all-- and the reality of the current Canadian Aboriginal scene -- lack of choice, poverty and despair.

With each page of journalling I re-lived, reflected and responded anew to situations delightful or disturbing. Through the course of this study, the process continued as I revisited my time in the North with a certain emotional and physical distance from the experience. I looked anew at the events of the year, having made the readjustment to my own culture. Similar to the unpacking of luggage and sorting through the myriad of memorabilia that was brought home, I re-examined my intellectual and emotional baggage and sought to grab hold of that which was worth keeping.

ETHICS:

The research analyzed and critiqued my own culture as it related to the Inuit culture, and as such is not intended as an anthropological commentary on another's way of life. Names and locale were changed for the sake of anonymity. No tape

recordings were made, nor were individuals' words captured verbatim. Data derived from personal reflections, memories, journalling, poetry and introspection. Ethics protocol was approved by the Behavioural Research Ethics Board on September 22, 2003.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK:

The research is informed by critical theory. Central to the critical school of thought is its resistance to domination, aiming for critical consciousness and emancipation from oppression in its many forms. Critical theory seeks alternative reasons for the social, economic and political inequities of life, other than those offered through traditional views and explanations (Grundy, 1987).

Critical theory had its roots in the Frankfurt School of the 1920s. Some of its most notable proponents include Marcuse and Habermas, who strove for a more egalitarian society, free from domination of any kind (Tripp, 1992). Critical pedagogy specifically underpins this study, in which justice issues in the educational arena are scrutinized.

Critical pedagogy ... signals how questions of audience, voice, power, and evaluation actively work to construct particular relations between teachers and students, institutions and society, and classrooms and communities ... Pedagogy in the critical sense illuminates the relationship among knowledge, authority, and power. (Giroux, 1994, p. 30)

Prominent critical educators include Giroux, Apple and Freire, all of whom advocated the raising of critical consciousness through education. When students are

armed with a critical lens – conscientization – they are empowered to reflectively act and transform oppressive conditions in their experience – praxis (Freire, 1970).

THEME:

When faced with leaving my first teaching post in Alberta, I desired to take with me some physical representation of my students as a reminder of the struggles and joys we had experienced in our years together. Thus came to be the patchwork quilt that presently decorates my front staircase. Each student received a fabric square to represent themselves in whichever manner they chose. My emotional leave-taking centred on the assembly of these artistic student self-expressions: stitching seams together and using contrasting fabric to unite individual squares with those of their classmates. Finally, stuffing and backing were added and the memories took on a tangible, purposeful form. Though composed of 35 individual self-portraits, each formed part of the larger picture that would serve for years to come as a source of both physical and emotional warmth.

In describing the method of this study, I once again borrow the metaphor of bricolage. Through this study I attempted to piece together a reflective whole composed of diverse pictures from my year teaching far from home. Composing this bricolage was a broad spectrum of colour, texture and text. In attempting to create meaning from my personal encounters I reflected, stitched together, ripped apart seams and re-situated squares of reality to bring a “psychological and emotional unity to an interpretive experience” (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994, p. 5).

The product of the interpretive *bricoleur's* labor is a complex, quiltlike bricolage, a reflexive collage or montage – a set of fluid, interconnected images and representations. This interpretive structure is like a quilt, a performance text, a sequence of representations connecting the parts to the whole. (p. 6)

BORDER CROSSING: THE ROAD TO ANOTHER WAY OF LIFE

The circumstances preceding my arrival in Nunavut made for a rushed decision and relocation process. The reality of the change in culture didn't fully impact me until I'd touched down (for the seventh time since I'd left home), and set my feet on the sandy rock of my new community. Admittedly exhausted from the flight, I wondered at that point what I had gotten myself into.

August 8th, evening:

I'm dog tired from the seemingly endless hours of flying in a cramped plane. Feelings of loneliness and of being displaced flood over me. There's nothing but rock here, and shacks on stilts, garbage strewn in each yard. Next door sits a pickup with 4 flat tires. Behind us lies an old discarded mattress and heaps of lumber that were once crates, still bearing the faded imprint: "Iqaluit 1994."

Inside the house I find numerous holes in ugly yellow drywall; an airplane-style toilet is the extent of the bathroom facilities. Dingy curtains hang from a few of the windows, the rest are bare. Felt markers from some past child tenant have left permanent stains on carpet, furniture, walls... None of the windows have screens, and as a result hordes of flies are buzzing throughout the house. The countertop is badly stained and ripped. Lamps without bulbs, without shades, a broken window... This is depressing.

August 9th, morning:

I wake up to the reality of my situation. I'm stuck here on a rock on top of the globe for almost a year, facing bitter cold and unending night...

This morning the principal gives me a quick tour of the school. Although a relatively new building, the outside school doors bear numerous long scratches etched into the blue paint, including several sets of initials and the declaration, "School is boring."

Inside everything is labelled with Inuktitut names: coat hooks, desks, exit signs, etc. Pictures of elders of the community are displayed in the front showcase, along with Inuit tools and toys of the past. Sitting behind a sled is a "family" of Inuit mannequins dressed in caribou skins. High on the library wall is sprawled the pelt of an angry polar bear.

Although the Inuit display that greets me reminds me of my outsider's stance, my feelings of culture shock subside immediately. Here is a culture that is familiar to me: school. The bright, clean atmosphere conveys a sense of order, a love for children, and an atmosphere of learning. Maybe I belong here after all...

BENEFITS AND DRAWBACKS OF TEACHING IN ANOTHER CULTURE:

Subsequent to my decision to teach in Nunavut, friends and acquaintances from home would greet me with the recurring refrain, "Why on earth would you go *there*?" The implication, though perhaps unspoken, was clear: "Why would anyone leave family and the comforts of home to go to such a God-forsaken place?" It was assumed that either insanity or desperation for a job could be the only mitigating factors.

Literature cites various reasons given by teachers for seeking employment in cross-cultural settings: dissatisfaction with a present job (Marlowe, 1994); seeking out of new challenges (Bernardi, 1989); desire to travel or work in a developing country (Armitage & Power, 1997); and even as a cure for burnout in the traditional school setting (Wagner, 1992). Whatever the reason, there are many potential benefits as well as difficulties in serving in another culture. The element of travel in and of itself can be an educational experience. "Part of the promise of travel is to live and know the self in other ways" (Neumann, 1992, p. 183).

Journeying to lands unknown often serves as a backdrop which reflects back

the state of one's life. Travel can be used as a vehicle of escape not only from one's environment, but from elements within one's own identity. Escape was indeed a recurring theme concerning many non-Inuit in the North. A school board official was quoted in a local paper as saying, "We're tending to get people who come to the North...who are running away from something." Were workers, whether labourers or professionals, escaping past career failures, bad marriages or the past in general? What dynamic would this bring into Nunavut communities?

In a study of education students, Bryan & Sprague (1997) found predominantly positive results from overseas internships, including an "increased sensitivity to and empathy for students from other cultures and of different language backgrounds" (p. 201). The authors found the experience also had long-term positive effects on flexibility of teaching strategies, as well as implementation of new multicultural curricula. Other benefits listed by the teachers included: open-mindedness to student learning differences; increased patience with second-language learners; sensitivity to student cultural background and its effect on learning experiences; and increased versatility resulting from the practical concerns of limited school resources in remote areas.

However, literature also sets forth numerous personal and professional difficulties which are encountered, especially disruption to family and the shock of finding oneself in an unfamiliar culture. In their discussion of overseas employment opportunities, Armitage and Powell (1997) term this disorientation "culture shock": "the gap between the familiar, which has been left behind, and the new being

perceived for the first time.” They see this gap transforming as it passes through three distinct phases: 1) initial excitement and optimism in the face of new opportunities; 2) settling into an everyday work routine, which may result in confusion, loss of self-confidence and depression; and 3) the necessary adjustments are made and an enjoyable life is established in the new culture. (Or, in the absence of this last step, expatriates and their families simply endure their problems or return to their place of origin.)

Through my teaching experience in the Arctic I was able to catch a glimpse into the personal and professional lives of many non-Inuit teachers. All of us struggled with the change that surrounded us. Some teachers were (to a greater or lesser extent) able to make the transition and effect the necessary adaptations to lifestyle, while others made the decision to leave, either immediately or after “toughing out” the year.

November Afternoon in Nunavut

A white desert

Wind whipping snow across the
bleak landscape

Light now,
but not for long ...

The sun perched just above the horizon

A golden coin frozen in the sky
Its brilliance masked by swirling mists of white

Winds howling under house foundations
rattling tin roofs

Wind chill - 57 ...

We walk in cognito

strangers to one another

All that is visible, a grounded "Snow Goose"⁵
waddling through the drifts

Narrow tunnel surrounded by fur obscures any facial features
Identity exists only through the plastic window on a sleeve.

Only the beginning...

The long,
cold,

dark

winter

is yet to come.

– D. Harder (1999)

⁵"Snow Goose": a popular brand of winter parka, especially made for northern climates. One distinguishing feature is the plastic I.D. holder visible on the sleeve.

In addition to the experience of personal culture shock when faced with a new environment, non-native teachers must deal with the “considerable disruption to the personal circumstances of family” (p. 505). Relocation to another culture impacts a family, whether they are left behind or join in the journey. Though perhaps previously taken for granted, careers of other family members and loss of one’s social network of friends have the potential to be major sources of contention in a foreign culture. Include in the list the practical considerations of the cost and availability of the necessities of life, health concerns, and coping with climate extremes, and stress becomes a major factor for the entire family.

Marlowe (1994), who left behind grown children and aging parents for a teaching position in Africa, reflects on his decision to relocate:

I came to the conclusion that one of the weakest links in American culture was freedom of movement. People leave family and friends far behind to pursue advancement. That leaves parents separated from children and creates a general melange of people without proper guidance, and here I am perpetuating the same problem of which I have been critical. (p. 32)

North American trappings can be found in many countries, creating the illusion that cultures are similar and communication easy to achieve. Culture shock, however, is a common occurrence in cross-cultural settings due to the many new uncertainties of life. It proves to be less problematic to those who take an active interest in their new surroundings and who use a variety of positive coping mechanisms (Barna, 1994).

A main ingredient of the culture shock experienced by many southern

teachers in the North, is the level of poverty and despair that is evident in Inuit communities. Waterman (2001) goes so far as to label Nunavut “an illiterate nation not yet weaned from alcohol, social assistance, illiteracy and disease” (p. 230). A white anthropologist married to an Inuk woman comments: “If current trends continue, most of the Inuit living in the Arctic in the year 2025 will be second-generation wards of the state, whose society, economy, and culture may have more in common with an urban slum than with the life their grandparents knew” (Irwin in Waterman, 2001, p. 226). Considering most teachers arriving from the South are from middle-class backgrounds, the initial sense of dislocation can be considerable.

No small component of culture shock in the North is the severity of the Arctic climate, which comes as a jolt to even seasoned veterans of harsh winter weather: “Even my winters in Alaska have not prepared me for this sort of omnipresent cold” (Waterman, 2001, p. 219, speaking of central Nunavut).

For the uninitiated and unprepared, the differing educational views and practices of the Arctic comes as a surprise. Waterman describes his visit to a Nunavut classroom:

[One] teacher laments that his lessons are awash because the seventh-graders can’t read above comic book level. That day, a half hour into a journal-writing assignment, most kids get no further than copying the date off the blackboard. This same seventh-grade class is being taught the equivalent of fourth-grade math. (p. 302)

EASING THE TRANSITION INTO CLASSROOMS OF A NEW CULTURE:

Wagner (1992) speaks of his overseas teaching experience in glowing terms:

highly-motivated and well-travelled students, who “have experienced things that other children only dream about” (p. 37); supportive parents; American textbooks [and thus “no need to learn another language”]. Clearly, not all foreign assignments are in fact cross-cultural in nature, as Western schools dot the globe and small pockets of privilege exist alongside less fortunate circumstances.

At the other end of the spectrum – perhaps the more common scenario – is the mainstream teacher who comes into close contact for the first time with situations of poverty and despair.

A fellow principal once told me that as a Qallunaaq [⁶], the more experience I had with both poverty and isolation the more I would understand the North, because much of what I would see around me was greatly affected by those two factors. It was therefore very difficult for new teachers who came from middle-class, white, southern urban experiences – virtually all of us – to have any means to analyse life in the village. (Tompkins, 1998, p. 102)

Needless to say, not all cross-cultural experiences have positive results, whether for the teacher, his/her family, or the students involved. According to Armitage & Powell (1997), “assignment failures” stem from one or more of the following: (a) social concerns (especially spouse and family); (b) health concerns (stress-related medical conditions; climate extremes); or (c) cultural concerns (inability to adapt to the new environment).

Literature points out that many factors contribute to the relative success or failure of a cross-cultural teaching experience, not least of which is the teacher’s

⁶ *Qallunaaq, Kabloonaq, Qallunaat, Kabloona* are a few of the various spellings of the Inuktitut term for non-Inuit people.

attitude. Having witnessed years of teachers coming and going, and having herself experienced life within a new culture, a southern principal of an Arctic school summarizes it well:

For almost all of the Qallunaaq it was their first time working in a cross-cultural situation where they were the minority. It was interesting to watch how people varied in their responses. Those teachers who seemed to have a good sense of themselves were able to reach out, to ask questions, to check out situations, and to start to explore the community and the culture and find its differences and richness. These teachers found teaching and living in the community rewarding and contributed to the school's success. Others...were not able to venture outside themselves, were always fearful, and stayed within the white world. They rarely partook of community events, they fraternized almost exclusively with other Qallunaaq, and they were critical of the parents and community. (Tompkins, 1998, p. 103)

In order to facilitate a better fit between white teachers and their new communities within another culture, compulsory teacher training in the vernacular and culture would be one step in the right direction. Wagner (1992) points to the need for open-mindedness, a good sense of humour and ability to adapt to new situations and “a spirit of adventure” in teachers seeking cross-cultural employment. It is vitally important for teachers to take an active role within the community, reducing teacher culture shock and establishing a mutual respect between teacher, parents and students (Taylor, 1995).

Ode to the Barge

No pencils
 no glue,
 no paper or scribblers

No Xerox toner,
 paper towels,
 post-it notes, or construction paper –

No, not till the barge comes in.

The barge, the barge
The Arctic's floating department store

Sofas and dog food, lumber and Lego
Fridges and carpet, trucks and tea
Carrying a gas station underneath.

In Arviat now, they say
On its way to Pond Inlet
Another 3 weeks...

'Til then,

No pencils
 no glue,
 no paper or scribblers

No Xerox toner...
(Never mind! The copier's broken and doesn't work, anyway...!)

– D. Harder (1999)

WHAT DOES CROSS-CULTURAL TEACHING DO TO TEACHERS?

Teachers are well acquainted with the fact that it is not just the students who are impacted by the classroom experience: teachers themselves undergo change and transformation during the course of their mutual journey. What are some of the personal and professional effects that teachers experience?

Although Deborah Britzman's writing (1991) concerns itself primarily with the experiences of student teachers, many of the points raised are equally applicable to those already in the teaching profession. Negotiating one's teacher identity, whether in its initial stages or mid-career, is a dynamic and continuing procedure which exposes the vulnerable "underside of teaching" and a multitude of incongruencies and paradoxes.

Britzman draws attention to the "messiness of learning," and the "multiple voices and heteroglossic tensions" at work in the ongoing business of becoming a teacher. During my stay in Nunavut there were many occasions of feeling inexperienced, confused – even frightened – and at a loss to inspire. Many a frigid morning I would have to muster up the necessary fortitude to assume the teacher persona. Although I wore the mantle of authority that had been bestowed upon me, it was an uneasy fit. There were times it felt three sizes too large, and much too bulky and cumbersome for me. Confronted with a new setting and a new culture where the old rules no longer worked, I was in need of re-educating, re-learning what it meant to be a teacher.

Just exactly what was my role in the education of these Inuit young people?

Who did they expect me to be, and how did this compare to my previous role in the South? The journey was not a comfortable process, as it involved examining previously assumed truths and reconciling myths from the past with the challenges of the present situation. However, this process of dialogism is critical as teachers negotiate their identity and the role they play (Britzman, 1991). Along the way teachers must sort through a “cacophony of past and present voices, lived experiences and available practices” (p. 8) in order to find resolution to frustrating realities of the present. This “discourse of becoming” never entirely comes to an end, but merely takes another turn in the road to a destination as yet unknown.

Present in the majority of teaching professionals is the desire to make a difference, to effect some positive change in the lives of students, and in so doing carve out a better, more justice-oriented world for the future. It is this hope, this vision, that fuels the countless hours of extras that come packaged with the job. Without this driving passion, I doubt many teachers would last long in the profession. But what happens when the teachers’ efforts are consistently met with resistance, and the vision itself is called into question? What if, all good intentions aside, the net result is seemingly more destructive than beneficial?

Although there may be numerous discomforts involved in making the physical adaptations to culture shock, it can be equally traumatic to adjust one’s ideologies in light of new realities. Such disorientation can be experienced without relocating to another country: it can be found within the confines of your own town or city, provided you travel to the right places. These journeys thrust one’s hidden

biases into full view, forcing an often uncomfortable reckoning of past experience with present situations. “The confrontation with myself as teacher served to reveal limitations of my perspective as well as submerged prejudices...What had existed within my belief system as an invisible background shifted to the very visible foreground” (Gibson, 1998, p. 369). Not only are such confrontations and self-reflections inevitable, but Gibson holds they are necessary to understanding cross-cultural settings. Educational views (whether acknowledged or not) are politically charged and must be “*actively and explicitly* challenged by teacher educators ...” (p. 365).

Dialogic discourse is critical for teachers, as we are often unaware of the cultural baggage we bring to our profession⁷. Ignorance of these invisible trappings often leads to misunderstanding between students and teachers, causing teachers to blame students for what appears to be inappropriate behaviour (Obidah & Teel, 2001), and results not only in miscommunication but missed life opportunities for vast amounts of children (Corson, 1992). Instead, teachers need to question their own biases and beliefs (Delpit, 1988), acknowledge their “white-skin privilege” (Heron, 1999), and engage in the struggle to see their own cultural framework for what it is (Finney & Orr, 1995). Such personal investigation and transformation are essential to creating positive reform within our schools (Nieto, 1999).

⁷A state referred to as “ethnic innocence” by Gay (1977).

The Road to Discovery: One Woman's Journey

In reading *Because of the Kids* (2001), I became aware of numerous parallels to my Nunavut classroom experience. The book outlines the journey of a successful middle-aged white teacher (Teel) who is aided by an African-American colleague (Obidah) in an attempt to improve her rapport with black students. Teel found herself in a classroom filled with angry students who were not motivated the way past white students had been. She experienced discipline problems and resistance to a degree to which she was unaccustomed. She received no respect for herself as a person nor as teacher, resulting in feelings of alienation, confusion, and dissatisfaction with herself and her professional skills. Realizing she had very little in common with her students and their families, and unwilling to reprimand students "for fear of being considered a racist" (p. 4), she felt powerless to bring about change.

Often Teel realized she was not in control of the class, with regular incidents of teacher-student clashes disrupting the pedagogical objectives of the day. Other white teachers were also frustrated and openly expressed their exasperation with African American students, describing them as "uncivilized" or "animals." Unwilling to accept this less than satisfactory state, Teel approached a black colleague for guidance in improving her own teaching strategies and her students' learning experience. This proved to be an often discouraging task, as both white and black colleagues voiced their conviction that white teachers would never be successful in crossing racial and cultural barriers. Obidah, however, was willing to guide Teel in looking anew at the dynamics of her classroom, including her own actions and

reactions to students. Her concern for her students was never in question; however the mode of communicating that concern was.

...Karen really didn't know how to navigate her genuine care for the students across racial and cultural barriers...Her instinct about how to respond effectively to the students was warped by her beliefs, though well intentioned, that informed her interactions with her students. (p. 60)

In other words, simply caring about them isn't enough. Students need to hear that message in a language they understand.

As a result of her professional introspection, Teel changed her class expectations and attempted to listen to students when they expressed anger instead of merely reacting to them. Teel saw in retrospect how she had "sabotaged her own good intentions through ignorance of racial and cultural differences" (p. 54). Realizing that class disruptions stem from multiple causes, she undertook the task of redefining inappropriate behaviour, and began to draw from a new slate of creative teacher responses.

Such a journey toward self-knowledge is not without considerable risk to both teacher and students. Minority students can be skeptical of becoming too close to the dominant culture. Being too cooperative with the culture of power could be viewed as fraternizing with the enemy or selling out one's heritage.

For the teacher there are daunting risks in becoming actively engaged in self-scrutiny. Turning the searchlight for truth inward is rarely a pleasant experience. Just what will be found as a result of such a penetrating gaze? Shifting the focus away from student misbehaviour to teaching attitudes and methods, poses risks to one's

professional self-image. There exists the real possibility that, in spite of the best of intentions, a teacher might never succeed in understanding the students nor be an effective teacher to them. In efforts to assuage feelings of guilt, it becomes all too easy for educators to shift the blame back to the students, claiming they aren't teachable. "...Because of prevalent views of African American students as failures, the White teacher is patted on the back for trying to achieve a goal with unsurmountable odds: that is, educating these students, especially African American students from economically disadvantaged backgrounds" (p. 55).

As the year progressed, lunch-hour chatter in our Nunavut staffroom became increasingly acrimonious. Day after day talk reflected exasperation and anger over the morning's events. Would I be able to break from the mould of teacher-talk around the lunch table without sounding somehow critical of or superior to my peers? What might have originated as concern for improving classroom procedures often degenerated into lengthy bickering sessions. Students were deemed incapable of learning southern curriculum, and uninterested in the values that would enable them to interact in the modern social and academic world of mainstream Canada. It became a battle to retain a positive attitude when surrounded by such a daily chorus of complaints. It was too easy for teachers to become defensive and focus on the misbehaviour of students. It was too risky a procedure to lay oneself bare and risk discovering vital flaws in one's teaching abilities – abilities which had been useful in past years (even decades) of teaching elsewhere. The stakes in self-evaluation would be high, indeed, and few possessed enough fortitude to undertake the task. It was

much easier instead to bury one's head in the sand for the duration of time (usually short) within this alien environment, continue with age-old classroom management routines, and deem that the fault lay with lack of resources and student and parent attitudes in this remote community.

In reading Teel's story, I see my own journey reflected back to me many times. I was armed with wonderful intentions of helping, enabling and caring for students, yet I felt ill-equipped and powerless to bring about even the slightest change. Frustration, student-blaming, self-deprecation, despair... There is indeed risk in crossing cultural boundaries in the classroom. The chaos I experienced in Arctic classrooms flew in the face of the teacher training and experience I had acquired in the past. Like Teel, I had been ingrained with the belief that an effective teacher should command the respect of her students, leading them in an orderly manner on the path to self-actualization. Instead, I was confronted with a classroom of adolescents with totally different ideas of what constituted appropriate classroom behaviour, educational and personal life goals, and definitions of success.

October 17th:

Things that don't matter in Junior High classes up here that were "unlawful" in my last teaching position in Alberta:

- gum chewing*
- cap wearing*
- chair tipping*
- paper planes flying during class*
- pencils used as missiles*
- students unprepared for class, without writing materials of any kind*
- students lying on the floor/sleeping at their desks*

- *ignoring teacher's requests*
- *wandering around while the teacher is talking*
- *rude comments/insults about teacher's appearance in her presence*
- *interrupting the teacher mid-lesson*
- *leaving the classroom without permission*
- *calling a teacher by first name*
- *listening to a diskman while the teacher is talking*

How are we supposed to teach in a setting like this?

* * * * *

JUST EXACTLY WHAT IS MY CULTURE?

As beneficial as it may be to learn of one's "new" culture, it is critical to examine the culture of privilege from which mainstream teachers come (Nieto, 1999; Tompkins, 1988). Although we spend our lives going to school, creating social networks, working and just generally living day to day, how often do we take the time to actually examine the way we conduct our lives or what ideologies underpin them? Indeed, are we even aware that there might be a need to critically examine our values, our way of life?

It was not until I had experienced life outside the familiar, the comfortable, that I began to see the need for reflection. It then became apparent that not everyone saw life from the same frame of reference as I did. The first such experience for me occurred during my husband's sabbatical year in Toronto, a location far different from the Western neighbourhood in which I grew up. The setting of my childhood was a growing urban centre where the vast majority of residents were of European descent, with only a few Asian people present in the melange. Although several

Aboriginal reservations were close by, the Native presence was an invisible one for me. We knew “they” were around, but most often it was on the seedy side of town where no decent young woman would be caught. It was this insulated, mainly homogenous community that became the norm for me: English-speaking, industrious and white-skinned. The musical score of my life was thus relatively straightforward, composed of simple, predictable chord progressions.

Although still within the same country, Toronto represented a truly cosmopolitan centre with a broad variety of cultures and languages. It was here I first found myself in the minority, where the colour of my skin did not place me at an advantage. I clearly recall the first such occasion on a streetcar in downtown Toronto. At that particular moment I was the only white, fair-haired, blue-eyed person aboard, and I recall feeling distinctly anemic-looking in comparison to my fellow passengers. Around me buzzed a variety of languages – I had no idea what was being said, let alone the languages I was eavesdropping upon. It was a moment of discovery that there was much diversity “out there”, something to which I had previously never given much thought.

During that year we lived in a predominantly Jewish part of Toronto, and our children attended a neighbourhood public school which had a definite Hebrew flavour. Adjacent to the school (and looking as if it were a fixture of the schoolyard playground), stood a Jewish cemetery, its headstones engraved in Hebrew symbols. All Jewish holidays were celebrated within the school walls, and classrooms rang with songs about dreidls and menorrahs, latkes and bagels. Our children’s best

friends were Jewish, Vietnamese, Portuguese and Cantonese, holding religious beliefs that ranged everywhere from Hinduism to Wiccan. Grocery store shelves housed large sections devoted to Asian, Italian, and kosher foods. My world and that of my family had suddenly expanded, and views previously taken for granted became in need of re-examination. How do I understand the exclusivity of the Christian church in which I had grown up? How do I teach my children to honour diversity and yet remain true to the values our family had embraced? Were all those values even worth embracing? Here racial and cultural diversity struck me full in the face, and I was forced to do some personal accounting and shifting of attitudes. It was an introduction, a prelude to living as part of the minority in a sea of humanity.

If the time spent in Toronto was the prelude, my year of teaching in the Arctic proved to be an entire symphony of strange new harmonies. A continuation of the personal reckoning that had begun in Toronto, the year spent in Nunavut proved to be a major challenge to both personal and professional arenas of life.

The North American Worldview:

Although it can be hazardous to affix labels to any culture (including one's own), it is nonetheless a valuable process to examine prevalent patterns which reflect

the worldview⁸ of the mainstream⁹.

According to Samovar et al. (1981), the North American worldview tends to emphasize:

- **individualism and independence.** Respect and social status are ascribed to the self-made person, who is the ultimate example of success.
- **the importance of structured work and separation of work and play.** No goal is unattainable provided one is willing to work hard enough to achieve it.
- **time as a precious commodity.** Proceeding in a linear fashion, time must be carefully budgeted and never wasted. Reflecting this concern for use of time is the importance of practicality and maximum efficiency.
- **future orientation.** Time speeds toward the future, which holds out possibilities for change and improvement over present situations.
- **materialism and secularism.** An improved economic situation is the desirable outcome of work. Progress is usually measured by quality of life, comfort level and accumulation of possessions.

⁸Worldview: “a comprehensive view or philosophy of life, the world and the universe...that shapes how we interact and respond to the world around us [and]...influences, shapes and interprets what we experience” (Arnot, 2002, p. 76).

⁹Various terms are used when discussing the dominant culture, often reflecting the author’s relationship to it. Some writers refer to the “North American/western” culture as opposed to “eastern”(Samovar et al., 1981); others use the term “European/Eurocentric” as a contrast to the culture of Indigenous peoples (Battiste & Henderson, 2000); still others differentiate between “southern” and “northern” viewpoints (Brody, 1991).

– **the importance of science and technology.** Empirical data forms the basis of knowledge, which can be used to alter present realities

– **striving for goodness.** Humanity endeavours to interact with the world in such a way as to promote “good” behaviours and eliminate evil.

– **humans as separate from nature.** “Nature and the physical world should be controlled in the service of humanity” (p. 67).

– **the dominance of white middle class views and practices.**

Reflecting an ethnocentric outlook, North American culture tends to see its values as universal: “our culture is the best, the most advanced, and the most correct” (p. 85).

Samovar’s description of North American culture rings true to me, and summarizes the values in which I was raised in southern Canada. Far from being universal in nature, however, Eurocentric ideas differ vastly from other worldviews. Many cultures do not regard economic success as an important goal of life, as few countries on the globe can entertain even the possibility of attaining material comforts, and would be content with the necessities of life. Science and technology do not hold central position in many cultures because of the conflict it creates with social orders and traditional values. “The active, aggressive manner of a western person may be interpreted as arrogance while the passive acts of an eastern person may be viewed as timidity and weakness” (p. 94). Many non-western cultures take a more passive view of events and prefer to allow the cycle of the universe to unfold

naturally, as opposed to Eurocentric tendencies to actively work for change. Non-western cultures tend to regard aesthetic and spiritual concerns as more important than issues of efficiency. Western cultures may strive for self-improvement at the expense of family and social concerns, in sharp contrast to other cultures where group welfare is placed above personal ambition. Reflecting the importance of the individual, North American families tend to be nuclear, whereas other cultures emphasize the importance of extended family and downplay the role of the individual.

What is the outcome, then, when one culture collides head-on with the opposing views of another? “When people who rely on different sources of knowledge attempt to reach cooperative decisions, they may find that they disagree about the need for action let alone what action is proper” (p. 93). Miscommunication, misunderstanding, confusion, conflict... A square peg in a round hole...

October 28th:

This culture is very definitely different from anything I've known growing up. We Southerners are so quick to pass judgment, and yet where are the benefits of this lifestyle that seems to breed greed and an unwillingness to work (at least according to Kooblanaq standards), and where formal education isn't valued? Teachers have often been heard to say that these kids are used to being given everything - nothing is special, nor is it appreciated. The students supposedly have no motivation, no respect for authority or sense of shame, and no desire for self-improvement. The White-man's methods of pride in accomplishments, of reward for work well done and shame for what is not right - these don't work here. My traditional methods of teaching practice don't have any effect.

I am, indeed, lucky to have the position I do, where I can often see the kids in small groups or individually, where they transform into totally different beings. Here they seem

receptive, respectful, obliging (usually) and almost eager to learn. How do I reconcile this reality with that of my colleagues?

Some classes that I visit I think I could manage. There are others that I fear would eat me alive. I admire Jeanine's patience with the junior high class. She puts up with/selectively ignores scores of incidents everyday that would absolutely drive me insane! What's the use of trying to teach in such circumstances? I wonder how it is even possible... And yet, amidst the clamour, the unceasing infringements of conventional classroom behaviour, there is still some learning taking place. To give up on them, though definitely the easier route, would mean lost opportunities for the kids. I have so much yet to learn...

DECONSTRUCTING THE WHITE MIDDLE-CLASS TEACHER PERSONA:

After arriving in a new culture there often ensues an unsettling “unpacking” (Young, 1998) of one’s personal knapsack of privileges, and a difficult coming to terms with the inequalities evident in a new community and school.

For mainstream women, not questioning our pasts and reordering our past experiences so that they appear unproblematic ties us to a perception that difference is someone else’s problem – one we want to help solve, but not necessarily one in which we ourselves have played a role. (Norquay, 1993, p. 245)

Our task is to deconstruct our self-narrative and to recognize the part we have played in perpetuating the injustices around us. Although begun when I first stepped foot into my new surroundings, the process of unpacking continued with the reflection required of this study.

Sleeter (1993) states that white people in general and teachers in particular must learn to recognize and acknowledge the presence of racism within their own lives, including their professional teaching practices. She suggests a re-education via immersion experience within another culture, coupled with education into the history

of that particular group, while aiming for “emotional bonding” and “serious re-examination” of one’s perspective. Such is, in fact, what my time in Nunavut came to be. Immersed in another culture for a school year, I worked closely with people whose ideas about life and education were significantly different from my own; at the hands of my Inuit colleagues, parents and students, I acquired knowledge of and an appreciation for the values and strengths of their culture; a university course offered over the internet provided opportunity to examine some of the educational and political issues which were of concern to Inuit people; and there was a great deal of time available for reflection.

As a result of this intensive experience in alternative worldviews, I came to an uncomfortable realization: I was indeed a member of the privileged group in the global village. From the outset I had experienced the benefits of being born into an English-speaking, white, middle-class circle, never questioning why I should receive such advantages while others did not. When the “Other” was brought up, it was commonly held that it was insufficient effort on their part that hindered their upward mobility. After all, millions of European immigrants had shown that hard work and determination could help realize dreams of prosperity and happiness. Basically our family and countless others of European descent had orchestrated their own success stories through toil and perseverance. It was assumed that others had the same opportunities for self-amelioration; if they chose not to access them, it was “their own fault.”

For the first time I was forced to deal with inequities close at hand. Part of my

journey led me to question whether or not I even had the right to be where I was, teaching another culture what *my* culture had deemed important for them to learn. Hugh Brody's (1991) book, *The People's Land*, was a disturbing affront to my presence in the North. Brody sharply criticizes Southerners who come North to seek their fortune, fulfill their "missionary" intent to civilize and educate the Aborigines, or merely as a quest for adventure.¹⁰

Bourdieu (1977) describes the various forms of capital which serve as markers for those in positions of power. My very presence as a white teacher drew attention to the fact that I possessed all the forms of symbolic capital of the South, and therefore the power to control my own destiny and that of others: economic capital (I was comparatively well off financially); cultural capital (university education); and social capital (in a respected position as a teacher). By contrast, few Inuit possessed any form of the symbolic capital so valued by the mainstream nor the life opportunities offered through them.

McIntosh (1988) describes her middle-class background in terms of social capital obtained simply by reason of race and class:

I have come to see white privilege as an invisible package of unearned assets which I can count on cashing in each day, but about which I was 'meant' to remain oblivious. White privilege is like an invisible weightless knapsack of special provisions, assurances, tools, maps, guides, codebooks, passports, visas, clothes, compass, emergency gear, and blank checks. (p. 1-2)

¹⁰ It is interesting to note, however, that Brody was himself a Southerner, who had lived in the North for only 4 years before publishing his first book berating southern exploitation of Arctic land and people.

As time wore on, there were other voices to contend with on my journey to self-understanding. Simply acknowledging the injustices dealt from the hand of White colonizers of centuries past did not go far enough. Not only is our imperialist history a skeleton in the mainstream closet, but it continues to influence Canadian culture today. Heron (1999) describes the dominant culture in terms of a bourgeois ideology in which all members play a part, whether acknowledged or not. Ironically, a critical component of this identity involves maintaining innocence of all past injustices. "The Canadian disavowal of participation in imperial relations and racism is necessitated by what must be continually forgotten: that we are already culpable of participation in these relations, including genocide" (p. 95).

Through centuries of colonialism and perpetuating imperialist agenda, racism has become entrenched in North American discourse.

We cannot remove ourselves from these relations to a site that is not inscribed with domination, for no such place exists...; just as we cannot find an innocent knowledge that will absolve us from responsibility for who we are in imperial relations, and who we have been/are being produced to be. (p. 89)

The teaching profession, generally held in high esteem within our society, is a vehicle for continuing White dominance in the classroom (Schick, 2000a). It is vital, however, that teachers maintain the appearance of innocence, with any hint of racism denied or rationalized, as intolerance is not compatible with the respectable teacher persona. The teacher acts out his/her role in the classroom as a morally responsible citizen whose intentions are to develop, rescue or "save" others less fortunate, whether in economic, educational or religious arenas. In discussing reasons for

international development work, Heron (1999) asserts that, although reasons may appear altruistic in nature, it is actually their superior, more enlightened status which compels workers to intervene in scenes of global chaos.

Not only do we feel morally obligated to intervene, and through planetary consciousness see the world as our field of action; not only do we position Others as amenable to our intercessions; but we take for granted that we can go to, live, and be active in other people's countries – and lives – *if we choose* to do development work. In a sense, our altruism becomes our passport... (p. 111)

Being white and middle-class is normalized, considered neutral or ideal, while anyone else is labelled “Other” (McIntosh, 1998; Frankenberg, 1996). Accustomed to thinking of racism only in terms of someone else's disadvantage, McIntosh (1998) gradually came to view the other side of racism, i.e. white privilege, which places her race at an advantage. “My schooling gave me no training in seeing myself as an oppressor, as an unfairly advantaged person, or as a participant in a damaged culture. I was taught to see myself as an individual whose moral state depended on her individual moral will” (p. 166). Oppression, then, takes on not only the active forms of intolerance and persecution, but is also embedded in everyday white privilege which remains an invisible phenomenon to those who benefit from it. In this light, racism can be viewed as the dominance of one group over another, whether actively asserted or merely accepted as an uniterated state of the norm.

Teaching was historically viewed as a means of creating respectable, “civilized” British subjects (Stanley, 1990), fulfilling one's duty for improving the world. The two desires of teachers, namely “to be confirmed in their teacher roles and to maintain power” (Schick, 2000a) are placed in jeopardy when teaching

Aboriginal students who do not readily comply with these goals. Teachers “are in love with their roles and their performances of domination by which they impose their desires on others” (p. 307).

When put so crudely, the above statement catches my attention. Was this in fact a reason why I chose the teaching profession? The need to be in control in class and the definite ideas I possess about the best ways of imparting knowledge and skills, now sound suspect. I like to believe I am flexible, but it is still I who must hold the reins. Suddenly my professional goals seem less than flattering, even blatantly authoritarian. Again Brody (2000) has acerbic comments on the subject: “Perhaps all education has as its objective some form of breaking: the perceived willfulness and even wickedness of children has been as much an issue for many educators as ignorance” (p. 183).

How do teachers react when faced with accusations of racism and assimilation? Many are stunned (as I was) at such a charge. Through my readings I have encountered several teachers’ stories recounting how they felt they were “colourblind... a proponent of equal opportunity... compassionate”, only to discover that they, too, were complicit in perpetuating white privilege at the expense of others. “It is hard to accept that I was more racist than I had ever thought possible...I am beginning to understand that by ignoring and suppressing knowledge about other cultures, their perspectives and their contributions, we have created monocultural environments for our students” (Walters, 1994, p. 95).

Shame, guilt and pain are commonly occurring but ultimately ineffective and

incapacitating emotions that may arise from dialogic discourse. A recent professional development workshop sponsored by the Office of the Treaty Commissioner became another significant point in my personal pilgrimage. Through the readings and discussion it became repeatedly evident that First Nations peoples had been the object of racist and assimilationist practices in the negotiating of treaties and the building of our country. The sense of shame I felt was not easily shaken. However, lingering in that state is not desirable either. As members of the privileged mainstream, we need to move past the shame and blame-laying to pave the way for change (Nieto, 1999; Thomas, 1994; Norquay, 1993).

* * * * *

A few words of wisdom gathered from my readings to those of us burdened by guilt:

- ▶ Use discomfort as a catalyst to question, investigate and learn new things about yourself;
- ▶ Keep asking questions and learn to live with ambiguity (Schick, 2000b);
- ▶ “Remember that you are not responsible for wrongs committed before you were born, but you can’t escape the legacy of those wrongs...and you are responsible for what you do now” (Thomas, 1994, p. 172).
- ▶ And remember: “Part of being in the power group – whether you like it or not – is being the target of anger when people start to analyse how they are being mistreated by ‘your’ group of people, and to demand that things change” (p. 171). This might explain a great deal of the angry adolescent behaviour

toward me in Nunavut classrooms.

January 25th:

The Junior High class that I've been working with lately dished out an unusually large amount of verbal abuse today. The term "Kooblanaq" was muttered several times during class, as well as numerous complaints about non-Inuit teachers. No doubt there is a lot of anger at the white authority figures in their classrooms.

SOME MYTHS CHALLENGED IN MY "DISCOURSE OF BECOMING":

**** My own educational goals and methods should be the pattern for effective learning.** How do I reconcile my own early education [Just how much was "truth" and how much merely the voice of dominant society?] with the Inuit worldview and the history of the education they experienced at the hand of Whites?

**** The ability to read and write fluently is of paramount importance to a successful life.** The Inuit culture has survived for centuries without pen and paper: are their lives therefore unfulfilled?

**** I must command respect for my authority in the classroom.** My pedagogical training centred on the importance of teacher control and maintaining an environment conducive to learning. How do I manage the class when such authority is resisted?

**** I can make a difference in the lives of these young people.** Despite the best of intentions, teachers often find themselves "embodying the very traditions they hoped to change" (Britzman, 1991, p. 20) and powerless to effect change in the face of politically charged contexts. Would I be able to become the teacher they needed

me to be?

**** Education is a neutral, non-political institution.** “...Teaching is fundamentally a political activity in which every teacher plays a part by design or by default...” (Cochran-Smith, 1991, p. 192). Whose voice is the one heard through today’s Inuit curriculum: is it the voice of Indigenous people of the North, or does the voice of “cognitive imperialism”¹¹ continue to prevail?

Crossing cultural borders presents teachers with numerous challenges, including wrestling with one’s racial history. My colonial legacy was an invisible but powerful part of the teacher package I had brought with me to the North. Unwittingly I had reinforced old patterns of domination through methods of relating in the classroom, and even by my presence in their community. Understanding another’s value system and working for change in our interactions can only occur when we revisit the past from another’s frame of reference. This, I feel, is one of the greatest tasks of teaching in a culture other than one’s own.

¹¹Battiste & Henderson, 2000

BORDER CROSSING: ALTERNATE VIEWS OF EDUCATION

During my visit in the Arctic there were many baffling moments for this urban, white, English-speaking teacher from the south. Along the path to enlightenment, to my re-education in what it meant to be a “good” teacher in this new setting, there were many obstacles. In re-reading journal entries penned during that year, I realize my writing had become the spillway for a flood of questions. The concerns arising from my cross-cultural encounters served as a springboard for reflection and inquiry regarding the meaning of education, and prompted a return to research, to my peers and to my hosts for clarification. In the pages that follow I share a few of the most perplexing puzzles, as well as part of my journey toward a better understanding of myself and my role as a teacher in the midst of new ideas of education.

WHAT IS THE INUIT CONCEPT OF EDUCATION?¹²

¹²In attempting to describe commonalities within another culture, caution is advised against oversimplification and stereotyping (Stairs, 1994; Hamilton & Sinclair, 1991; Cheyney, 1976). However Deyhle & Swisher (1997) point out that “knowledge of group tendencies presents a framework through which to observe and understand individual behaviours” (p. 151), and is a useful (although limited) tool for culturally appropriate approaches to education. With this in mind, I look to existing literature in search of recurring patterns in the educational ideologies and practices of Aboriginal people in general, and the Inuit in particular.

October 5th:

An interesting realization occurred today while working with Bryan, an 8 year-old special needs student. In an attempt to develop his fine motor skills, he was colouring a picture of race cars proceeding to the finish line. As he was experiencing difficulty staying between the lines, I tried to explain that we must stay inside the lines just as a car must stay in its lane on the road and not venture up onto the sidewalk. A very clear parallel, I thought, until it hit me that there are no sidewalks here - no safe havens for pedestrians. Vehicles travel wherever they wish: roads, yards, frozen ponds ... So much for my clear illustration! What else am I wrongly assuming is transferable between the classrooms of these two cultures?

As I knew little about Aboriginal education before my arrival in Nunavut, it was eye-opening for me to realize how differently our two cultures approach the subject of education. From the first days of my new assignment, I experienced a clash of cultural values and ideas, not only about teaching methods, but the very basic goals of education and life itself.

Arlene Stairs (1995) outlines two differing Inuit ideas of education: *Ilisayuq* is an abstract, highly verbal mode of learning, removed from the social context of daily life. Aiming to teach job skills, it “validates knowledge on the basis of objective proof and expert opinion” (p. 145), and forms the basis of mainstream education. *Isumaqsayuq*, on the other hand, emphasizes knowledge gained through observation and imitation within the structure of family routine. The goal of *Isumaqsayuq* is full integration into society, and validation of knowledge “on the basis of life experience and community consensus” (p. 144).

Traditionally, Inuit education took the format of *Isumaqsayuq*, occurring within a true-to-life context (Koenig, 1981), and as a preparation for community life (Charter, 1996). Each person possessed valuable knowledge which was meant to be

shared (although not imposed on others), and was not personal property. “The land” constituted the classroom, with parents the primary teachers in children’s ecologically focussed education.

Native peoples have for centuries placed great importance on nature, and the land occupies a central, almost sacred position in the culture of the Inuit (Wolforth, 1998; Oakes & Riewe, 1996). “The native peoples’ identity, pride, self-respect and independence are inseparably linked to the land and a way of life that has the land at the centre” (Berger, 1977, p. 95).

Inuit people have defined traditional knowledge as one’s practical land-based experience, handed on to succeeding generations. Rather than a distinct commodity, education was an integral part of a life centering on respect and the stewardship of natural resources. Holistic in its approach, *Isumasayuq* encompasses both physical and spiritual realms of life.

Education centered around the visual: information was received through observation and imitation rather than verbal instruction and explanation (Kaulback, 1984; Berry, 1971; 1966). Parents did not formally instruct their children and there was no enticement to learn something for which the child was not ready. The belief in one’s *isuma*¹³ and its development dictated that the mind was private property and not to be intruded upon. When the time was right, the child would seek out the knowledge he/she needed. Ross (1992) states that this modelling approach to education had its roots in the survival context, as the subject of reading and

¹³*Isuma*: one’s mindset, innermost thoughts and feelings (Qitsualik, 1999)

predicting nature does not lend itself easily to teaching. “Instead it requires that one watch, and watch again... What had to be learned could not be expressed easily, if at all, in words...” (p. 78).

Aboriginal views of raising a family can be very different from that of mainstream society. In matters of discipline, many Inuit view Kabloonaq ways as overly rigid and invasive of one’s privacy (Vallee, 1972). In addition, Inuit parents desire to see their grown children remain close to them throughout their lives. Unlike the southern pattern of preparing children for autonomous adulthood, Inuit wish their children to become “layered” onto the family, constantly nearby (Ross, 1992). The successful Inuit life was measured in terms of congenial interdependent relationships among members of extended family.

Indigenous children were traditionally (and generally continue to be) raised with more independence than their peers in mainstream society (More, 1989; Vallee, 1972). From an early age, children were given the freedom to make their own choices, for good or ill (Brant, 1982; Philips, 1972). Parental interference did not often occur unless the danger was significant, preferring to allow children to learn from the natural consequences of their deeds. Briggs (1970) links the Inuit belief in *isuma* to these non-authoritarian views of child-rearing. Because the *isuma* grows with the child, there is little or no discipline required of young children. “This was not casual indifference, but rather the belief that the child was simply not old enough to be taught how to behave (Nortext, 1999, p. 62).

The Inuit notion of *Isumaqsayuq* has close parallels to “communities of

practice” as outlined by Lave and Wenger (1999). In such communities, learning occurs in a milieu of social relationships as a result of observation and participation, and has a de-centered view of the student-teacher relationship. The goal of education, full membership into the community, stands in sharp contrast to the aim of mainstream education where individual success is paramount.

TODAY’S NORTHERN CLASSROOMS:

October 7th: [My first time supporting the teacher of one junior high class]

Only 4 of the 20 students showed up for this, the last class of the morning. They included:

Marje, who lies on the floor wearing a vacant expression on her face. She is definitely not “all there”. Drugs? One wonders...

Joe, sporting a ragged cap scrawled with painted names, rips the paper covering from the table and throws books at other students. In spite of being refused permission to leave the room, he grants himself a bathroom break of 20+ minutes...

Rhonda continues writing in her journal for another 10 minutes after the teacher had said it was time to stop and read the novel together. [I guess if a student is actually doing work, you don’t stop the flow, no matter the timing or the position assumed (lying prostrate on the floor)].

Capped head cradled in his arms, Pete refuses to cooperate in any way in the journal writing activity. When asked about his activities for the coming holiday weekend (or any topic, for that matter), his repeated answer is, “I dunno.” A few minutes later he begins trudging aimlessly around the class while the teacher is talking, a process that continues for the remainder of the class.

And this was supposedly the older, “more mature” class - Yikes!

Was learning occurring here? Not according to anything I'd experienced during undergraduate training. Why is this scene so typical of classrooms in the North? Why the total boredom and apathy of students? Why was this situation tolerated and not "fixed"?

While still relatively early in the academic year, attendance in this junior high class was at a meager 20%. Already students were demonstrating their views regarding the priority of formal schooling. Just where was the rest of the class and why had they chosen not to attend school?

It could be argued that the few that were present had their minds elsewhere and not at all on the teacher's agenda for the class. It seemed that Marje's primary need at the moment was not a lesson in Language Arts. The solution to her lack of attentiveness was probably far more complex than merely adjusting lesson plans or subject material. Joe seemed bent on destroying school property and creating a disruption of any learning that might be occurring for his peers. Pete's apathy could have centered around discomfort with the writing process, or perhaps personal concerns were uppermost in his mind and journal writing was simply not a priority. While seeming to be uncooperative with the teacher's instructions, Rhonda was actively engaged with her writing and was not willing to cut short an activity which was presently meaningful for her.

Modern classrooms are the scene of conflicting pedagogical practices for many Indigenous students. It is ironic that educators may supply culturally appropriate curriculum while ignoring Aboriginal views on the education process: "It

is as if we have been able to recognize that there are cultural differences in *what* people learn, but not in *how* they learn” (Philips, 1983, p. 132) [emphasis added]. In her research dealing with the Warm Springs Indian Reserve, Philips describes the impact of foreign teaching methodologies introduced into Native classrooms. Aboriginal children are accustomed to learning under the guidance of older relatives, and tend to progress at their own pace through the stages of silent observation, supervised participation and private self-testing. From an early age, children are welcomed to community events that are inclusive of all ages, where no one individual controls the activities, and where all are invited to participate when and in the manner he/she chooses. In contrast, the oft-encountered school reality has an unfamiliar non-Native teacher assuming the sole position of authority, who determines who, when, how and if students are allowed to participate. Interaction in this scenario is highly verbal in nature, and public performance of skill is a required element for success. The liberty to which Inuit children are accustomed stands in sharp contrast to the more authoritarian southern framework they experience in school. Under these circumstances, students find themselves with little or no choice regarding what or how they learn.

Recognizing that there are many variations in learning style within Aboriginal cultures, research reveals the presence of commonly occurring learning preferences among many in the Inuit community. Koenig (1981) found the majority of Indian, Metis and Inuit students in her study preferred to operate from “relational cognitive” styles (valuing teacher warmth and flexibility), whereas non-Native teachers

predominantly preferred teaching in an “analytical cognitive” style (emphasizing objectivity and problem-solving). Amidst these cultural differences there arises the potential for considerable misunderstanding between student and teacher. Likewise, Philips (1983) found that White teachers often misinterpret Aboriginal student communication. The temptation for mainstream teachers is to view minority students’ responses as apathetic or disrespectful, instead of finding their source within another culture’s values. Such misunderstandings, coupled with classroom power imbalances, can have serious long-term consequences to student educational success (Crago et al., 1997).

The ethic of cooperation and commitment to the group impacts Aboriginal classroom procedures, as students are often unwilling to vie for turns (Ward, 1992), or flaunt individual knowledge at the expense of peers. Whereas turn-taking, direct questioning and evaluation of student response are an integral part of the more competitive southern classroom, Inuit prefer non-evaluative replies to student responses, less teacher-domination and more peer exchange in classroom discussion (Eriks-Brophy & Crago, 1994). Many Indigenous students are reluctant to “perform” in class (i.e. be called on individually to answer teachers’ questions). A sense of modesty hinders individual students from becoming the centre of attention, preferring instead group oriented-activities and a co-narrative style in which students overlap with each other’s ideas (Deyhle & Swisher, 1996; Ward, 1992). Private mental practice is necessary for competence, which is a prerequisite for any form of public performance. In addition, learner-directed rather than teacher-directed

activities are more compatible with the independence students experience at home, where there is little adult direction but rather the freedom to observe, imitate and explore.

As in past generations, modern Inuit parents do not attempt to entice children into learning through the use of rewards or withholding of privileges (Deyhle & Swisher, 1996). This is illustrated in *Innuqatigiit*, the present Nunavut curriculum:

“When things are too complex for a child to understand or use, they are not encouraged to understand. The burden is too heavy for a child and develops a weak mind” (Northwest Territories Education, Culture & Employment 1996, p. 10). The implications of this value were evident in the classrooms I observed: students were often not motivated by teachers’ incentives to investigate a subject in which they had no interest. Neither did parents seem to encourage their children to apply themselves in school if they showed no innate curiosity in curriculum content.

In a study of Inuit teachers in Nunavik, Eriks-Brophy and Crago (1994), searched for classroom routines that seemed to work well for both students and teachers. Typically, lessons did not center around the Initiation-Response-Evaluation format that is commonplace in mainstream classes. Lessons focussed less on lecture and questioning, and more on ideas springing from small group discussion. Individual students were rarely singled out for questioning, criticism or even praise. The teacher’s central role was that of facilitating cooperative learning experiences. This decentered role of the teacher helped promote equality, respect and cooperation within the classroom, and deterred the growth of competition and individual “loss of

face”. Similar findings arise from Stairs’ (1994) research: many Inuit teachers commonly made themselves accessible to individual students who might wish help in private. Avoiding the Kabloonaq tendency to over-explain, they often made use of personal narratives as an effective strategy for teaching.

The tendency of modern schools to lean primarily toward decontextualized *Ilisayug* learning is a concern for many Nunavut parents and teachers (Stairs, 1995). Although today many wish their children to be educated in “white” skills that provide them with opportunities as wage-earners, Inuit parents desire also that the next generation respect traditional ways (Condon, 1987). According to Brody (1991), this integrated educational outcome is often not a reality, with students inadequately prepared for either mainstream jobs or traditional hunting/gathering lifestyles – “half White and half Inuit...a lost people” (p. 227).

In summary, southern teachers have introduced and many continue to operate from an educational belief system that is foreign to Inuit culture. When teacher and students hold differing views on epistemology and methodology, students often do not understand school routines or its educational goals. “A people whose knowledge is a felt knowledge, sensory knowledge, will look at the world very differently from those whose knowledge is primarily intellectual...” (Ross, 1992, p. 81).

Community Feast

Caribou soup, bannock, muktuk done
Now the dance...

Happy, sweaty children's faces
Young girls packing¹⁴ older teens' babies
or their own siblings

Children gleefully playing train
Grabbing another's shirt and hanging on
while those ahead pull them along

Hot and humid inside the school gym
Live band music – Inuktitut-style – filling the air
Toothless elders, babies – everyone is here.

Schoolyard a parking lot of abandoned Hondas
A hub of activity through the gym doors tonight.

Carefree kids ambush their teachers
to give out hugs, kuniqs¹⁵, and fiddle with teacher's earrings;
Allowed to stay up until the wee hours, they say
(But it's a school night, I muse...)

Life is more than school, I remember
and learning can happen outside of classroom walls...

– D. Harder (2000)

¹⁴Packing refers to carrying a baby in the hood of a parka

¹⁵*Kuniq*: Inuktitut term for affectionate greeting or kiss

WHY ARE INUIT STUDENTS SO FAR “BEHIND” THEIR SOUTHERN PEERS?

December 9th:

While helping a class rehearse their Christmas Concert song, a host of thoughts sweep over me. Although 11 and 12 years old, the kids have lot of trouble sitting/standing still, listening and staying on task. Their knowledge of music is very limited, and they have trouble discerning even basic differences in pitch.

The kids are definitely “wired,” excited to be performing. They’re just a little too eager for demonstrating appropriate school behaviour (at least according to southern standards). The entire episode served to remind me to let go, to “hang loose” and not worry about the little things (like pitch, rhythm, dynamics, enunciation, focus, etc.) – all the things that are deemed critical in most music classes. Here, on this day, learning music skills wasn’t what was most important.

It seems to me that conventional teaching of skills is often an exercise in futility here. The students have no interest in learning how to write a complete sentence or how to do long division. Most days teachers are just thankful the kids show up for school at all, and hope that maybe they catch something during their stay with us. I guess it’s not about marks and the volume of knowledge to be dispensed, but finding students’ growing edges, expanding on their experience, and stretching their minds just a bit ...

What was true in my experience with music seemed to be the case in most subject areas: students often worked several grade levels below what their age might dictate in the South, with few students ever receiving a high school diploma (Condon, 1987). What is the reason behind this? Who is “to blame?”

Many variables come into play in addressing this question. One major factor is the irregular school attendance that is a reality in Arctic schools. Students regularly leave school for days at a time to go “out on the land” on hunting and fishing trips. The school recognizes these as important opportunities in the education of Inuit young people, and such occasions are deemed “excused absences.” However, there is

also a high degree of truancy among students. School is often not a high priority for students or their parents, and if a babysitter is needed for a younger family member, students are often kept at home to lend a hand. In keeping with the traditional methods of childrearing, parents frequently permit children the choice of whether or not they will attend school. As school is often not favourably viewed by the community, many parents do not encourage children to attend until such time as the social worker becomes involved in extended periods of truancy. Whatever the reason, sporadic school attendance will inevitably have repercussions in scholastic achievement.

Past practice in Inuit schools has been to advance students to the next grade level in spite of inability to perform at required skills levels. It was felt that retaining students in the same grade would discourage them from attending school at all. As a result of this policy, many (if not most) students work at a level significantly below their assigned grade. This automatic advancement of students in spite of low skill levels has resulted in a quality of education that is “significantly diluted, at least by southern standards” (p. 164).

Another consideration in Inuit education involves the high degree of respect afforded to the family unit. Older Indigenous students will rarely sacrifice family relationships by moving to another community to further their education. Their ultimate desire is to remain close to extended family, and the opportunity for self advancement that removes students from their communities is not usually a viable alternative. In speaking of Navajo culture, Deyhle and Margonis (1995) point out that

definitions of success outlined by American schools "... would, in many cases, require an abandonment of basic Navajo attitudes and beliefs" (p. 163).

Deyhle and Swisher (1996) describe the "deficit ideology" which for centuries has underpinned mainstream views of Aboriginal education, the goal of which is assimilation into white culture. Past research concluded that Native children lacked the intelligence to succeed in school, although testing was based primarily on mainstream ideas and used a high degree of verbal interaction. According to educators of the day, these tests supplied evidence that Indigenous people were incapable of academic curriculum, demonstrating that Aboriginals needed changing, "fixing."

One problem encountered in the mix of white and Indigenous views on pedagogy stems from the fact that intellectual and sensory knowledge do not peacefully coexist in most educational institutions. Mainstream does not value the traditional wisdom of Aboriginal peoples, but instead seeks to impose its own frame of reference and definitions of knowledge. When the two worlds collided, the Aboriginal stance was labelled "deficient," in need of repair. Clearly it was assumed the Eurocentric way was better.

Another stereotype centered around "vacuum" ideology (so termed by Wax et al., 1989) which claimed that students were empty vessels, void of knowledge and understanding, and in need of enriching. Parental influences on the child were deemed undesirable, and use of Native language was seen as a barrier to academic success as it reinforced cultural roots and deterred the assimilation process. School

dropout rates reflected individual failure, and were not the responsibility of the school. “Youth who leave school are described as deviant, dysfunctional, or deficient because of individual, family, or community characteristics” (Deyhle & Swisher, 1996, p. 127).

Ross (1992) reminds us, however, that Natives are not just “primitive versions of us, a people who need only to ‘catch up’...” (p. xxii). He emphasizes that traditional life on the land required a great deal of mental effort. Action was only taken after it had been mentally rehearsed and re-rehearsed, to ensure a successful outcome. Aboriginal people do indeed possess talents and cognitive abilities that could provide a strong foundation for formal education, providing those abilities are recognized as such.

During the 1970s an alternative emerged to the cultural deficiency view of Indigenous students. The “cultural difference” model attributed low academic performance to the differences between home and school environments, not their genetic and cultural background. Although there continues to be a higher incidence of minority students in special education and remedial classes, many times it reflects teachers’ lack of cultural awareness and a tendency to negatively judge behaviour that is different from their own (Crago et al., 1997).

As mentioned by Deyhle and Swisher (1996), comparison of education standards often relies on measurement of skills valued by the dominant culture, not taking into account the many strengths of Aboriginal students. Although they may tend to have difficulty with tasks involving a high degree of verbalization,

Indigenous students excel in areas requiring perceptual skill. After centuries of honing their senses to the language of nature, the Inuit possess a vast repertoire of skills that are normally not measured in standardized tests. Indeed, I now realize that my initial question (i.e. wondering why students were so far behind) was framed within the context of education as I had experienced it, through the lens of what is deemed valuable by white, middle-class EuroCanadians like myself.

September 4th:

On my return flight from a meeting in Iqaluit, I noticed a quote displayed on the airport wall : "It takes 45 hours to learn how to fly. It takes a lifetime to know when."

Knowledge is comprised not only of technical skill and "know-how," but also the wisdom to know when to use that skill. It reflects the ancient Inuit understanding that "the time must be right."

HOW DO I UNDERSTAND THE SILENCE AROUND ME?

It is ironic that one of the questions nagging at my consciousness concerned silence, when my experience in the classroom was met with quite the opposite reality. Students loved to visit with each other when they were supposed to be working quietly, or annoy one another ("Teacher, he's bothering!"), or just generally thwart the teacher's plans in whatever way possible, usually involving some form of noise. However, there were periods of unexplained silence when a Southerner like myself would expect a rousing discussion to ensue, or at least *something* offered

verbally. This linguistic void wasn't confined to the classroom: I realized after a few staff meetings that it was rare that Inuit teachers would speak. Conversations were easily dominated by the Kooblanaqs (whether or not it was intentional on their part). What brought about this reality?

High/Low Context Communication:

Aboriginal cultures are "silent" only in comparison to southern standards. We, on the other hand, appear verbose to them: "As every Native could tell you (but won't), white men spend too much time talking" (Ross, 1992, p. 27). Inuit people have not traditionally engaged in southern pleasantries, i.e. "Hello," "thank you" or "please." Even today, there is no Inuktitut word to express "please," rather it is understood in one's manner and facial expression. One of my first experiences with kinesics in the Inuit classroom concerned students wrinkling their noses to indicate "No" or raising their eyebrows for "Yes." Although at first I didn't understand the silence that met my questions, my more seasoned colleagues eventually explained this cultural reality to me. [I can only wonder at what the children were thinking as I would continue to pepper them with the same question, waiting for a verbal reply. They responded by raising their eyebrows higher each time ("Is this teacher blind?"), to the point that their eyes seemed ready to pop from their sockets!]

Hall's (1976) discussion of "high and low context" communication patterns provided enlightenment on the subject. In high-context communication much is embedded within the context, is understood and therefore left unsaid. By contrast, low-context communication belabours verbal explanation. Clashes between these

two communication styles are often evident in cross-cultural classrooms. Non-Native, “low-context” teachers are frustrated with the lack of detailed explanation they receive from students, who offer only minimal responses (a few words or perhaps a single sentence). Aboriginal, “high-context” students are frustrated that their contributions are regarded as inadequate. Their assumption is that the non-verbal information is obvious; teachers, however, continue to pry for more information than the students are comfortable dispensing.

Silence and Survival:

We in the South seem to have an aversion for quiet. Noise follows us wherever we go via TV, radio, diskman or cell phone: we seem bent on filling any void with sound. Inuit people, on the other hand, seem comfortable with extended periods of quiet: for example, waiting for hours on end for a seal to emerge at its aglu (breathing hole). They are accustomed to waiting in silence for the appropriate moment. “...It involves not only taking the time to walk through possible courses of action in advance but also preparing one’s self emotionally, and spiritually, for the course chosen” (Ross, 1992, p. 38-39).

Their response to new and puzzling situations involved the conservation of physical energy (including speech) in order to adequately consider all facets of the new circumstances. Only then would action be taken. Silence opens the door to productive mental activity. “...The greater the unfamiliarity of the new context, the more pronounced will be the withdrawal into physical immobility and silence” (p. 36).

A non-Inuk like myself can only imagine the quiet of traditional Inuit life on the land, with only the howling wind, the bark of seals and yapping of dog team to disturb the stillness. This was brought home to me during a spring trek on the frozen ocean.

March 17th:

Linda and I headed out for a brisk 2-hour walk this afternoon, exploring the southern edge of town: past the old stone church, out past the point, onto the frozen Arctic Ocean. There we stood, small pinpoints on a vast sea of wind-driven white, beneath an absolutely clear blue sky and a brilliant sun 45 degrees above the horizon. What a feeling to experience the total silence of the land, with not another living thing to be seen or heard anywhere. Just the occasional bang of sea ice cracking beneath our feet, signalling the approach of a new season. A palpable quiet encompassing us... Truly, it was "awesome."

In southern conversation patterns, we are often in a state of hurriedly spitting out words before someone interrupts. When another is speaking, our focus is not on listening as much as waiting for that split-second opening where we can interject our thoughts. Contrast this with "*pijariiqpunga*" (Nortext, 1999), the Inuit expression for which the world must wait: the speaker holds the floor for as long as he needs in order to express himself adequately, without fear of interruption or someone hijacking his thoughts in another direction.

Ross (1992) describes his efforts to explain Native silence in his legal dealings in Ontario courts. Although we are quick to term this silence "apathy", Ross found his attitude changing as he began to listen more carefully to what was (and wasn't) said by Aboriginal people:

...Contrary to my earlier impression, it was obvious that people not only cared a great deal about things but had also given them a great deal of thought. Second, they most certainly held definite views about what the appropriate

responses should be. They would not, however, give those views directly... The listener...had to find [the] conclusion himself. (p. 22)

Similarly, Indigenous people involved in group decision-making come to a consensus without ever articulating the conclusion: everyone is simply aware of it by meeting's end. The order in which facts are presented indicates their relative importance. For those who take the time to listen carefully, the speaker's intent becomes evident through the process.

Put in a nutshell, Aboriginal communication patterns reflect an "economy of speech and purposeful use of silence" (Deyhle & Swisher, 1996, p. 142). In the same fashion, anger was also to be restrained for the benefit of group unity and was not to be displayed to others. "This also gave, under very close living arrangements, a certain privacy which was otherwise not possible. Your own thoughts and ideas were kept to yourself..." (Brant, 1982). Expressions of gratitude and praise were viewed as unnecessary. One's best was always expected: there was no need for displays of gratitude.

Likewise, grief and sorrow were viewed as incapacitating feelings that needed to be quickly forgotten, in order to devote one's total efforts to the business at hand: survival (Ross, 1992). This has modern-day implications as well. While southern methods of dealing with problems lean heavily on talk – whether to a friend, a counsellor or religious figure – many Aboriginal people deny themselves the opportunity to discuss their problems. Doing so is a burden, an unfair imposition on another's life.

Silence as Resistance:

Silence may also be used as an escape from an unpleasant situation. Wax (1971) observed that Aboriginal children who were accustomed to cooperative learning often withdrew into a world of silence when faced with the “competitive, individualistic world of the classroom” (Deyhle & Swisher, 1996, p. 138). However, Foley (1996) dismisses cultural patterns as the reason for silence in the classroom, blaming instead the power imbalances in school for the unresponsiveness of Aboriginal students¹⁶.

Qitsualik (1999) offers yet another interpretation of traditional Inuit silence. Cultural beliefs held that the spoken word, when coupled with thought, possessed the power to create reality. Thus words were potentially dangerous and the Inuit became accustomed to using them sparingly.

Silence is therefore not to be equated with cognitive laziness; it can be an effective means to meditation, or it can quietly express volumes, if you know how to interpret it correctly. It would seem that mainstream culture could use a larger dose of the creative potentials of such silent reflection and care with one’s words.

¹⁶See p. 83 for further discussion on this topic.

WHY DO STUDENTS' FACES SO OFTEN REFLECT APATHY OR OUTRIGHT ANIMOSITY?

After a month of working intensively with the junior high class, I felt I'd begun to build some kind of rapport with them (i.e. I was at the receiving end of less insults). Although I had willingly sacrificed time and money to bake them a special treat from my ethnic heritage, it was met with silence and what I felt was an almost palpable greed. The morning was to end with a group photo for display in my office window, something younger classes had viewed as an honour of sorts. This group of young people, however, responded differently. The entire back row posed, proudly "giving me the finger."

January 28th:

How do I figure these kids out? In their own way, I think, they were appreciative of my gift. Most of them, however, didn't display it in a language I could understand... Are these kids really the way they appear: ungrateful, profane, self-centred and cruel? Or is this merely the "tough guy" facade? I don't know. I have no answers yet, but because I've spent some time with them lately, I'm less inclined to be judgmental. I do want to understand them better.

How could I make sense of what had just transpired? In his book, *Dancing With a Ghost*, Ross (1992) repeatedly admonishes the reader not to misinterpret the actions/inactions of another culture. "Be alert to any word or act (or absence of action) which you are tempted to characterize in negative terms. Ask first whether it evinces some consistency with the kinds of attitudes and approaches which...might have been of value in the survival context" (p. 43).

Although I kept in mind this exhortation to search for other possible meanings, it would seem that this adolescent gesture had no other interpretation

possible: it was intended solely as an instrument of insult. No, their actions had nothing to do with the survival context, at least not in the traditional sense of the word. There might, however, be more to this unsettling incident than met the eye.

I rationalized that the episode could not be directed at me personally. Perhaps this was a way of displaying their “coolness,” their disdain of authority, especially in the form of a white female. Was this their reaction to “the system,” to the tension they experience between traditional culture and the ever-encroaching values from the South?

According to Erickson (1993), teachers are representative of the dominant white society and therefore to be resisted, whether passively or actively. “Learning what is deliberately taught can be seen as a form of political assent. Not learning can be seen as a form of political resistance” (p. 36). Perhaps it wasn’t against me, but more what I represented, that they had reacted. White teachers unfortunately carry with them the legacy of past colonizers. “Whether teachers are racists or anthropologists... they are unable to create good student-teacher relations because of the political meaning of being educated in an assimilatory, White-dominated institution” (Deyhle & Swisher, 1996, p. 154).

In the same way, Obidah (Obidah & Teel, 2001) sees African-American students as nurturing a self-protective suspicion of white teachers: within each white teacher lurks the inheritance of past slave masters and a potential threat to contemporary black security. Sarris (1993), too, speaks of the white teacher being seen “as the latest representative of the dominant society who has come with

authority to teach and reinforce what that society values” (p. 256). In describing present-day Aboriginal classrooms, Wolcott (1987) goes so far as to use the war metaphor: students are prisoners of war, while teachers are the enemy who attempt to gain new recruits willing to betray their culture.

Indian students didn’t trust their teachers, even good teachers who deeply cared about their students. The teacher represented a member of the outside Anglo community, a community that has actively controlled the economic, religious, and political lives of the...community. Tensions in the larger community were often mirrored inside classrooms...” (Deyhle, 1992, p. 32)

In summarizing studies of Native American classrooms, Ogbu (1987) describes a scene that was re-enacted daily at our school: “They enter the classroom with a sort of cultural convention which dictates that they should not adopt the classroom rules of behaviour and standard practices expected of children in the public schools and presented by the white teacher in charge.” Older students in particular resist school rules and procedures, bringing instead their own agendas, whether they be socialization, catching up on sleep, or a general disruption of the teacher’s plans.

It isn’t easy to stand at the receiving end of barbs flung by disenchanted students, but perhaps, as Delpit (1988) outlines, it is a necessary first step to effective communication:

It means turning yourself inside out, giving up your own sense of who you are, and being willing to see yourself in the light of another’s angry gaze. It is not easy, but it is the only way to learn what it might feel like to be someone else and the only way to begin the dialogue.

Undoubtedly it would be in the community’s best interests to have Inuit

teachers staffing Nunavut schools, and it is the aim of NTEP¹⁷ program to move toward that goal. The present situation, however, is that the demand for Indigenous teachers far exceeds the supply. It would seem that the presence of non-Native teachers will be a reality for some years to come.

Calvin Racette, a Native educator at the University of Regina, provided food for thought for teachers meeting in convention (2000). He reminded those gathered that it is only now the second generation of Aboriginal people that are raising their own children, following the destruction of the family unit by residential schooling. "Children don't know what 'normal' is." The main point of his lecture focussed on the phrase, "Forgive and remember." We need to realize the weight of the past carried by our Aboriginal students, and attempt to understand their frame of reference. Racette challenged us to forgive, and remember from where they are coming. Rather than condemn their action/inaction, seek to understand. Forgive, and remember. These were powerful words that seem directed especially to me as I dealt with many incidents in the junior high classroom.

EDUCATION AND COLONIALISM:

Shingwauk's idea of a "teaching wigwam" for learning European ways sprang from the realization that such new ideas offered opportunities for the First Nations in America. His desire was that his people become educated in literacy skills and farming practices, and so learn to adjust to and benefit from the new wave of

¹⁷NTEP: Northern Teacher Education Program

thought flooding the land. And so, through both Native invitation and “European cultural aggression”, was born the residential school system of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, ultimately turning Shingwauk’s vision “into an Aboriginal nightmare” (Miller, 1996, p. 438).

Through residential schooling, Aboriginal families in Canada were split apart and denied the opportunity to control their own futures. Robbed of the right to use their own language and practice age-old traditions, they battled against assimilation into white culture. Although no longer in operation, residential schools continue to exert power over Aboriginal peoples of today. One survivor states that his children, although never students at residential schools, are also its victims. They suffer with the products of the system: dysfunctional parents (Henry, 1999). In the wake of cultural stripping, Indigenous peoples struggle to regain control of their language, culture and destiny. The deficit they experience is not one of intelligence or ability, but of power and privilege (Nieto, 1999; Ward, 1992).

During the centuries since European contact, Aboriginal peoples have fought the stereotypes and labels put upon them by those invading their land. In attempting to explain some basic differences between the two cultures, early research deemed Indigenous people as lacking, primitive versions of whites (Ross, 1972) and therefore in need of enrichment, if not actual remediation.

Accounts of physical and sexual abuse suffered at the hands of teachers and staff (mainly church leaders) horrify today’s mainstream culture. However, even apart from the physical and sexual abuses experienced by some students, the concept

behind past education of Aboriginal peoples was nonetheless criminal, for at its heart, residential schooling sought to eliminate a language and way of life (Brody, 1991).

Although we may pride ourselves in thinking that such prejudice no longer exists in modern schools, it is nonetheless “alive and well.” Staff room conversations still echo pro-mainstream biases. Many teachers bemoan Aboriginal students’ lack of basic knowledge, their apathetic attitudes toward school, their lack of responsibility, and disregard for others’ rights and property. However, Hanssen (1998) points out that racism isn’t always obvious or intended: “Rather than being expressed through racial slurs, it tends to be wrapped in noble proclamations of tradition, fairness and high standards. Rather than being a rare incident, it is woven into the fabric of our historically racist society” (p. 698).

Education has long been a tool for assimilation, seeking to undermine Aboriginal identity, history and spirituality (Longboat, 1984). Literacy packages offered to Aboriginal people required an abandonment of Native culture so as to become “white” (Deyhle & Swisher, 1996). Thus literacy was used as a means of preserving, rather than eliminating, unjust social and political realities (Stuckey, 1991; Delpit, 1988; Freire, 1970). By training Native children for low-income jobs, schooling has served instead to maintain poverty within the community (Deyhle & Margonis, 1995). The authors refer to “*push-out*” students as opposed to “*dropouts*,” shifting the blame from the individual student to the school system. Students who are mistreated by an insensitive education system and who view school

curriculum as irrelevant to their lives, opt for the only plausible alternative: to leave school. "I didn't care to finish high school... I was just learning the same thing over and over. Like the teachers didn't expect anything of you because you were an Indian" (Deyhle, 1992, p. 37).

Since the introduction of *Inuuqatigiit: The Curriculum from the Inuit Perspective* (1996), education boards of the North have been attempting to formally educate the young in traditional beliefs as well as modern views of Inuit life. Although strides have been taken to restore the Inuktitut language and culture into the curriculum, it could be argued that the present situation continues to reflect mainstream views and values and is "skewed toward the perpetuation of the world view and interests of the dominant group in power..." (Ghosh, 1996, p. vii). At the heart of the problem is society's equating difference with deficiency or disadvantage, instead of as a foundation to be built upon. Teachers, too, may be unwitting partners in the assimilation process, bringing their own values regarding what is important to know and how best to acquire that knowledge (Stairs, 1995).

To further complicate the educational scene in the North, a high turnover of teachers (usually from non-Native communities) contributes to a shortage of educators who truly understand the Inuit situation. "The dearth of indigenous teachers and the lack of special training for teachers in northern schools reflect a policy of 'cultural replacement,'" an extension of residential school philosophies of past years (Sindell & Wintrob, 1972, p. 45). There remains a great need for Indigenous teachers who can provide the necessary continuity and cultural context

for their students. In the meantime, however, power for educational decision-making remains largely in the hands of non-Inuit people.

In the face of present educational failures (substance abuse, crime, school dropout rates and suicide), it is difficult to hold out much hope for the future of Indigenous education. Despair is a frequent companion of Aboriginal young people, who can neither envision a future like that of their parents, nor one of assimilation into southern lifestyle (Brody, 1991).

The first impression of my Nunavut home brought me face-to-face with a harsh reality of life in the North, one which continues to haunt my memory:

August 8th:

When my plane arrived, the principal, vice-principal and another teacher were there to meet me at the weather-beaten trailer that served as airport terminal. They informed me that the tearful reunions around us were due to a suicide just hours earlier - a young man, one of last year's students. Relatives were now pouring in from neighbouring communities. The victim's immediate family were apparently part of our school staff. The community was obviously shocked by this suicide, but it wasn't the first time nor (tragically) would it be the last, if statistics told the truth. I climbed wearily into the waiting half-ton truck, swatting fiercely at the mosquitoes that sought me as their evening meal. During the ride to my new home, I tried to sort out some of the questions that raced through my mind: What causes a young person to abandon all hope and seek death as the only escape? What makes Aboriginal peoples especially vulnerable to such despair? What makes me believe that I can do anything to alleviate the suffering and hopelessness that dwell here?

Over the years several possible solutions have been suggested to the deepset problems in Indigenous education, including abandoning the competitive top-down learning environment common in the mainstream approach (Weber, 1996). Where teaching strategies and learning preferences match, it follows that students would more likely experience success. Ironically, such accommodations to curriculum

delivery can prove to be counterproductive in the long run, and contrary to students' best interests.

Sensitive to their students' wishes, many teachers at the Warm Springs Indian Reserve brought their lesson strategies in line with students' preferred learning contexts, and modified their teaching methods accordingly: no show-and-tell, few (if any) oral reports, and more time for independent or group work where the teacher was available for private consultation. Philips (1972) points out that, although well-intentioned, the teachers were in effect denying Native children the opportunity to navigate through mainstream culture, which would eventually offer them a choice of discourse styles from which to operate. She calls instead for a conscious effort to increase children's exposure to the dominant culture, although it may bring with it potentially uncomfortable contexts such as public displays of knowledge.

In the same vein, Watt-Cloutier (2000) claims that "academic standards and rigour have been lowered in the name of respect for the 'different learning styles' of Aboriginal peoples" (p. 115). Adapting curriculum to Inuit children's preferences has resulted in a watered down education that prepares students for neither mainstream nor traditional lifestyles, producing disillusionment and despair among Nunavik youth. "No matter the intent or cultural slant, if programs are designed and delivered without respecting and challenging the full creative potential and intelligence of children, then they will crush rather than liberate" (p. 118).

Many would argue that the dominance of white Eurocentric culture is a fact of life in today's world. To survive alongside it – and perhaps eventually transform

the inequities ingrained within it – today’s young person must be bicultural, able to “play the game” on mainstream terms. In order to serve as a vehicle for empowerment and transformation, critical pedagogy must therefore overtly teach the white man’s ways. Similar to Delpit’s (1988) call for minority students to be educated in the culture of power, Cairns (1972) claims that curriculum designed solely for the Aboriginal environment would constitute a form of “educational apartheid”: education must prepare for both worlds.

CONFLICT IN THE CLASSROOM:

I had possessed the best of intentions as I boarded the plane on the first leg of my journey north. I would strive to be the best teacher I could be to the Inuit children in my charge: enthusiastic, inspiring, creative, compassionate ... Yet once established in the routines of my new job, I found myself cast in a role I didn’t want, playing out a drama over which I had no control.

November 23rd:

When we came home today, we were welcomed by a front door splattered with the frozen remains of a raw egg. We can only guess as to the reason it’s there, but our housemate is having great difficulties with a few of her students. Hopefully this egg-decorating is not the beginning of a trend...

Recently a few 12 year-olds were picked up by the RCMP after a teacher at the neighbouring Arctic College heard loud banging on the door after hours. Adding their parting touch, some students had hung urine-filled condoms on the outside doorknobs to greet the teachers as they left the building. Just what are they trying to say to us??

Aboriginal classrooms are often the setting for the dramatization of “figured worlds” (Holland et al., 1998). Although the process is unspoken, roles are assigned and a drama is repeatedly played out in “a socially and culturally constructed realm of interpretation” (p. 52). Through the daily dramas of figured worlds, participants form their own social identities and power relationships are played out in an “as if” world. Newcomers to the “stage” soon come to realize their positions of influence (or lack thereof) within the cast of characters.

While teaching in Nunavut, I felt that many adolescent students had typecast me into the figured world of the white outsider teacher, and my words and actions were continuously interpreted in that light: Kooblanaq teachers were already rich, yet greedy for more; they dismissed Inuit lifestyle and age-old traditions; and they continued in the colonizing tradition of their predecessors. It would require all my energy to disassociate myself from that figured world. The script I was handed, however, had me stripped of any real authority over their lives, and in this realm, I was the powerless one.

Karen Teel (Obidah & Teel, 2001) describes her struggle in seeking to build rapport with her African American students in the United States. After struggling with feelings of powerlessness, frustration, and dissatisfaction with her own teaching methods, she does some painful introspection and re-examination of her beliefs, expectations and behaviour toward black students. With help from a colleague (Obidah), Teel discovers there is a way to rewrite the script of her figured world, but not without risk and pain.

In the classroom, students retain power by refusing to play along with school rules and expectations. By employing a “mask of silence”¹⁸ and staging a “performance strike”¹⁹, children create an atmosphere where control over learning rests in their hands. Cutting short the teacher’s agenda, silence and lack of cooperation become defence strategies to deal with the cultural conflict at work in the classroom (Dumon et al., 1972). Refusal to comply with classroom expectations can be viewed as a healthy manifestation of respect for one’s identity, while seeking to preserve one’s cultural heritage (Kohl, 1994).

I shouldn’t have been dismayed or even surprised at the presence of conflict in the Nunavut classrooms in which I taught. In calling teachers to challenge “head-on the many displays of privilege and inherent biases in the schools”, Nieto (2001) warns that it is taxing work which will inevitably bring about conflict. Freire, too, sees conflict as a prerequisite to empowerment: “Conflict is the midwife of consciousness” (Shor & Freire, 1987, p. 176). The parallel drawn here by Freire reminds that justice cannot be realized without some pain and a great deal of arduous work.

Unlike mainstream views, Indigenous peoples present differing educational goals, definitions of success, and unique approaches to pedagogical methods. In addition, their history of battling assimilation brings a distinct emphasis and perspective to educational objectives of Aboriginal communities. It is no wonder,

¹⁸Dumon et al., 1972.

¹⁹Shor & Freire, 1987.

then, that there is misunderstanding and conflict when white values determine the course of Inuit education.

BORDER CROSSING: CHANGING VIEWS OF LITERACY

September 5th:

Why are there so many reading problems here? How is it that after years of formal schooling, so many struggle to read even a simple story? What is the cause? How will I be able to offer anything of help that hasn't already been tried? How are these kids going to survive in the modern world with such poor reading skills? Indeed, how have the Inuit people managed throughout most of their history without this essential ability? Or is there perhaps another way of looking at the entire literacy question?

As my work as Program Support Teacher involved a large amount of literacy support, I was quickly presented with the puzzling question of why there were so few proficient readers at school. Similar to Ward's (1992) observations of First Nations classrooms, I found reading and writing to be a struggle for many students in my Nunavut classroom. Few students would be considered at grade level or beyond. It seemed that the demand for help with reading far exceeded the time I had available. What was the problem?

DEFINITIONS:

Over the years various meanings have been attached to the term "literacy". Traditionally its definition has revolved around the concept of reading and writing, with marked distinctions made between literacy and orality (Ong, 1982; Goody, 1968). Anderson, Teale and Estrada (1980) speak of "literacy events" as "any sequence, involving one or more persons, in which the production and/or

comprehension of print plays a role” (p. 60). In a National Assessment of Education Progress (NAEP) survey of young adults’ literacy skills (1986), the printed text maintains its central position: literacy is described as the ability to use written information as a means of achieving personal life goals.

Literacy is regarded by many within mainstream cultures as a basic necessity to a successful life; others believe that literacy has been “oversold” and its importance overemphasized (Smith, 1989). Social orders of the past believed there was enormous power for the individual possessing literacy skills, among them: the ability to think analytically, use abstract language and distinguish between fact and myth; increased possibilities for economic and social mobility; a tendency toward urbanization; citizens becoming more globally aware and socially conscious; even a lower birth rate has been credited to literacy skills. Though perhaps unspoken, this “literacy myth” (Graff, 1979) has pervaded European cultural beliefs and found its way into school curricula across our nation. The other side of the literacy myth held that those who did not possess the appropriate literacy skills were unintelligent, lacking critical thinking skills and more prone to crime – in short, “uncivilized”. It was the written word which enabled analytical thinking and propelled society from prelogical to logical thought (Ong, 1982). Thus emerged the “great divide theory”, with literacy as the key to unlock human capabilities.

Such a view becomes problematic as it relates to cultures previously deemed illiterate. While the European idea of literacy was highly valued, the possibility of alternate forms of literacy was dismissed, with curricula reflecting the central

importance of reading and writing skills. This “autonomous model” (Street, 1995) presents literacy as a set of decoding skills, and disguises underlying cultural assumptions. Street rejects this great divide theory, stating that it is at the root of the dominant status western literacy has over that of other cultures. Instead he puts forward an “ideological view” which sees literacy as a social practice, intimately tied to issues of culture and social power.

...The accounts we have of other societies, with different ‘mixes’ of oral/literate practices, suggest that they do not lack the logic, detachment, self-consciousness, abstraction and the other fundamental cognitive and social abilities that Ong attributes to (academic) literacy. (p. 150)

Forming the backdrop to Street’s literacy viewpoint is his experience with “illiterate” Iranian villagers, who were in fact involved in many literary practices within their own cultural contexts. There are dangers in assuming the existence of a single literacy and of imposing our own cultural definitions as the sole standard by which we judge other people’s literacies (Street, 1993).

In recent years researchers have expanded the definition of literacy to include other forms of communication, acknowledging the concept of *literacies* “rather than of a single, monolithic ‘Literacy’” (Street, 1995, p. 19). Vandergrift (1995) points out that people of all cultures are competent in several literacies central to their lives: “Reading, as I use the term, means bringing meaning to and taking meaning from a symbol system – not just decoding black marks on a printed page” (p. 40).

Literacy’s definition thus becomes reworked: the ability to “manipulate culturally meaningful symbols ...in a culturally appropriate manner” (Ferdman, 1999,

p. 97); the “competence to enter into a meaningful transaction with a particular community in a particular context”(Vandergrift, 1995, p. 39). Instead of equating literacy merely with the ability to read and write, Langer (1987) argues it involves a literate way of thinking and looking at the world which can occur even without the presence of reading or writing.

Many cultures possess forms of non-print communication which are essential to the process of meaning-making and could therefore be considered a component of literacy. As a contrast to traditional *School Literacies*²⁰, Gallego & Hollingsworth (2000) discuss the value of *Community*²¹ and *Personal Literacies*²². Another form of literacy is *visual literacy*, the ability to “discriminate and interpret visual actions, objects, and symbols natural or man-made” (Debes, 1969, p. 26). Birdwhistell (1983) discusses the importance of *kinesics* (i.e. communication via body motion), which forms an integral part of Aboriginal communication (Ross, 1972). Barthes’ (1983) writing examines the linguistic impact of *semiology*: “any system of signs, whatever their substance and limits; images, gestures, musical sounds, objects, and the complex associations of all these...” (p. 28). *Ecological literacy* has been

²⁰As defined by Gallego & Hollingsworth (2000), *school literacy* is “the learning of interpretive and communicative processes needed to adapt socially to school and other dominant language contexts” (p. 25).

²¹*Community literacy*: “the interpretive and communicative traditions of culture and community” (p. 239)

²²*Personal literacy*: “the critical awareness of ways of knowing and believing about self that comes from thoughtful examination of...backgrounds in school and community language settings” (p. 239)

described as the ability “to observe nature with insight, a merger of landscape and mindscape... [It is] driven by the sense of wonder, the sheer delight in being alive in a beautiful, mysterious, bountiful world” (Orr, 1992, p. 86).

Although stretching the boundaries of literacy according to traditional views, Aboriginal and minority cultures have for centuries made sense of their world through alternate and equally effective forms of literacy. “The history of literacy makes clear that people functioned effectively and imaginatively long before marking systems entered their lives” (Myers, 1996, p. 35). Brody (2000) points out the alternate literacies of the Inuit:

Hunter-gatherers read and write. They did not have the alphabetical or pictorial scripts...But all hunters read tracks; everyone who lives by hunting or gathering must notice, read, interpret and share the meanings of signs in the natural world. And where carvings establish family histories, people read images... These are also forms of literacy. (p. 191)

Within these parameters, then, there are potentially many literacies within the diverse cultures of the world. Rather than being merely a set of skills, literacy is a way of thinking, a means of deriving meaning from the world we experience (Langer, 1987).

COMMUNITY LITERACIES OF THE INUIT:

Through readings on the subject of literacy and in reflecting upon my short experience in Nunavut, I recognize within the Inuit culture several types of meaning-making which exemplify the more recent concepts of literacy practices. In the northern way of life, many symbols are encoded with meaningful messages waiting

to be “read.”

A) Inuksuit²³ – An inuksuk (literally, “thing that can act in the place of a human being”) is a type of rock cairn varying in size and shape, which dots the Arctic landscape. Visible from a great distance, inuksuit served as the traveller’s road map and represented “the thoughts of another person left upon the land... [much] as the words you read in a book” (Hallendy, 1999, p. 8). Coupled with oral storytelling, inuksuit were an important medium for transmitting knowledge from one generation to the next. It was critical in such a harsh climate to commit the landscape and its inuksuit to memory, so that those on the land possessed a mental map of the journey. Such “maps” would be helpful, even lifesaving, to subsequent travellers. The various inuksuk names, patterns of construction, and placement on the land reflect their unique purpose and message (Wallace, 1999)²⁴. Travellers educated in this symbolic language were able to unravel the messages hidden in each cairn.

In modern times the inuksuk has come to symbolize guidance in various forms. Whether literally on the land or on a symbolic journey, it is a symbol of direction from the past to those who presently find themselves “far from home.”

²³*Inuksuit* is the plural form of *inuksuk*, indicating three or more.

²⁴See chart page 91.

A SAMPLING OF INSUKSUK STYLES AND THEIR MEANINGS²⁵

<u>NAME</u>	<u>DESCRIPTION</u>	<u>MEANING</u>
Niugvaliruluit	Inuksuk with sighting holes in the centre	Points the direction for travel
Nakkatait	Found near lakes; made of 2 stones, the smaller of which is closer to shore.	Two or more in a row indicate good fishing spots. Smaller stone indicates where the hole should be made in the ice. The distance between the stones equals the distance between the hole and the shoreline.
Tupjakangaut	Located near mosses and lichens.	Indicate prime feeding grounds for caribou, and thus good hunting.
Aulaqut	2 or 3 rocks piled upon each other; in evenly spaced lines along caribou migration routes. Arctic heather is draped over top stone, serving as "hair"	Caribou are frightened away from the line of "humans", and herded to a spot where hunters await them.
Qajakkuviit	Tall towers of rock built around camps	A safe place to keep meat away from animals, and to store kayaks.
Pirujaqarvik	Stones arranged in a pile	Meat cache concealed beneath the stones. An inuksuk built on a nearby high point indicates the way to the food.
Tammariikkuti	A single stone placed atop an existing inuksuk by a travelling hunter	Informs that the hunter has changed his plans/ directions

²⁵ Sources: Wallace (1999); Hallendy (2000)

B) Clothing:

The manner in which a family was clothed told much about them. This medium displayed a mother's labours to ensure her family was suitably and attractively clothed, and a father's hunting skills in providing quality skins (Northwest Territories Education, Culture & Employment, 1996). In addition, Inuit clothing was a means of visual communication, encoded with information pertaining to gender, social and economic status, region of origin, marital status and religious affiliation (Kaiser, 1990). It provided both physical and spiritual protection for the wearer (Morrison & Germain, 1995). In recent times the Inuit have used their traditional clothing to express pride in their heritage and their intimate ties with the land during various land-claim negotiations with the government. "Contemporary Inuit clothing provides an intriguing unwritten essay reflecting the social, economic, and technological changes to which Inuit have adapted..." (Hall, Oakes & Webster 1994, p. 122).

Meade (1990) compares a parka to a book which can be read. "In our non-writing society the designs and symbols on a parka are our way of writing pertinent and important information. They are our way of connecting not only with each other, but with our environment and our world" (p. 230). Each element used in the creation of the parka carries with it a volume of meaning – the animal from which the skin originated, the colour and source of the dye, the form the parka takes, the fur used as trim – all tell a story to those with the ability to decipher it. The peak of the hood reveals the tribe, the shape of the tails, the breadth of the shoulders and the size of the

back pouch of a woman's coat reveals her age, marital status and whether or not she is a mother (Hall, Oakes & Webster, 1994). There is symbolism and meaning to every bead, every stitch: nothing is there by chance.

Clothing was also a testament to the spiritual beliefs of the Inuit people. Children's clothes would be carefully constructed from the skin of a caribou calf: its head used as the hood of the coat, its legs used as the child's pant legs, etc., implying a "symbolic, magical relationship" between the child and the caribou (Morrison & Germain, 1995, p. 146). Amulets were also sewn onto clothing as protection from evil and to bring luck to the hunt.

Mitts and boots were designed to reflect the occupation and social status of the wearer (Alia, 1991). Various styles, decorative patterns, methods of skin preparation, and construction techniques indicate the place of origin of Inuit kamiks²⁴ (Oakes & Riewe, 1996). So refined was the work that elders have been able to identify not only the region where the boots originated, but even the individual seamstress who sewed them.

C) Adornment:

The manner in which hair was styled defined the wearer's gender, status in society and regional affiliation. Although rarely practiced today, tattooing was once used to commemorate the watershed moments in a woman's life: puberty, marriage, childbirth, and death (Saucier, 1998). Tattooing patterns reflected a person's family tree (Neuman, 1917) and life story (Gilbert, 2000). After a successful whale hunt, for

²⁴*Kamiks*: traditional Inuit sealskin boots

example, the fluke of a whale tail might be tattooed on a daughter's cheek, thus advertising her father's hunting prowess. Although most often found on women, tattoos were also placed on men to indicate bravery (Morrison & Germain, 1995).

D) Nature:

One of the most vital sources of information was nature itself. Inuit speak often of reading the land, animal tracks, the sea, the snow, the clouds. All have much to communicate to those who understand nature's text. In reading an aglu²⁵, the water's colour, clarity and amount of ice crystals inform the hunter as to how recently a seal has been there (Pelly, 2001). Survival for a hunter and his family "...depended upon his ability to accurately read the innumerable variables which each season, day and hour presented" (Ross, 1992, p. 70). When living so closely connected to nature, being ecologically illiterate could cost one's life.

E) Art:

November 19th:

Local artists have the community mapped out and know exactly where the teachers, nurses and visiting professionals live. In addition they have an uncanny sense of teachers' pay schedules. In the days immediately following the arrival of our much anticipated paycheque, their pounding on the front door becomes a regular occurrence .

Resident artisans proudly display their wares in the hopes of a quick sale. Their artwork reflects the life that they once knew, a culture that is quickly being eroded by values from the south. Subject matter ranges from the commonplace activities of hunting and fishing, as well as delving into the spiritual world of monsters and shamans. Dolls are crafted to reflect the traditional style (amauti and kamiks) as well as more modern Inuit dress (calico Mother Hubbard parkas).

²⁵ Aglu: a seal's breathing hole.

We were eager to peruse their handiwork, whether it took the form of jewellery, sculpture or sewing. [One evening we were fortunate enough to have a hunter's bounty offered for sale: a "fresh" polar bear hide.] We were often obliging customers, glad for the opportunity to shop at home for such unique objects of beauty. After all, there were gifts to be bought for Christmas, anniversaries, birthdays... When our response was negative, however, we were occasionally met with a plea that the children needed milk, or some other heartrending request. After a few hasty reversals of decision, we gradually grew tougher skin and were able to stick with our initial, "No thank you." Whether their motivation for artistic creation stemmed from the inner compulsion to express their vanishing culture, or the need for cash, we weren't sure. In all likelihood it was a combination of both that prompted our Inuit neighbours to put knife to stone, needle to fabric.

In virtually all cultures art is a medium of communication, a visual representation of the artist's message. Kilims (Turkish rugs) have for centuries been employed as vehicles for literacy practices. Dating as far back as 2000 B.C., family stories have been recorded by means of weaving patterns in wool. In addition to standardized symbols used across the region, village women made use of personal symbols and designs woven into tapestries to communicate their ideas and values to succeeding generations.

In the Inuit culture, too, art forms are an important and popular means of transmitting information. In a time before writing materials were available, artwork was a common instrument for illustrating myths and legends and for conveying their important messages to those that would follow. "Since very little Inuit literature has been written down and published, the visual arts have become a valuable permanent record of oral history and myths: a carving or drawing of a legend becomes the equivalent of its telling in words" (Hessel, 1998, p. 60). Hand-stitched dolls are a "testament to the past" (Brownstone in Strickler & Alookie, 1988, p. 6), and recount the life story of a woman's work of household duties and nurturing children. Carvers

often speak of “putting a story into stone,” or rather discovering the story that lies hidden in the stone (Tookoomé, 1993). The artist must possess an intimate knowledge of what is being carved in order to effectively express that reality in stone, whether the subject of art be recording history or representing the skills of a hunter (Svensson, 1995).

In this way the Inuit have recorded their past in stone, textile, bone and prints (von Finckenstein, 1999), capturing and preserving the traditional lifestyle, as well as documenting the life they experience in modern times (Leroux in von Finckenstein, 1999). Art is often the vehicle used to capture skills or practices at risk of disappearing. Procedures and implements are depicted in stone or on paper in order to illustrate successful hunting practices, the drying of skins, or sewing of tents. In this way art serves as a “how-to” textbook, “an almost encyclopaedic visual catalogue” (p. 37) for those seeking to acquire the skills necessary for life on the land. Although critics have stated that Inuit art arose solely as “one giant government welfare project” (p. 187), it has served both as a means of preserving traditional lifestyle for coming generations of Inuit, and as an informative documentary for southern markets, the ultimate destination of most Inuit art.

A great deal of detail is visible in carvings of nature and animals, revealing the artist’s intimate knowledge of the land and wildlife with whom the Inuit share the world. Even though today’s Inuit now have access to alternate means of recording their history (writing in syllabics or English), artists still prefer the medium of stone, bone or fabric to express their culture (Blodgett, 1983).

December 10th:

Walking home from school in the blackness now synonymous with 4:00 pm, I catch the image of a carver bending over his work. Under the star-studded sky he sits, darkness surrounding him except for the glare of a mangled desk lamp which is focussed on the task at hand. The scream of the grinding wheel pierces the silence of the night. Temperature of - 40 degrees C... What conditions for an artist to work in! He fashions what he has experienced: the severity and beauty of nature take on the form of rock - this time a seal. Through it he pays homage to the animal that has sustained his ancestors for centuries, and so reaffirms his heritage as "Netsilikmiut," people of the seal.

F). Kinesics (Body Language):

Body language was, and still is, an effective means of communication among the Inuit. Certain kinds of smiles are distinguishable from others (Freeman in Leroux, Odette et al., 1994). "Yes" and "no" are effectively communicated by simply raising one's eyebrows or wrinkling the nose. Humility and respect are conveyed by averting the eyes from another's gaze, a required gesture when dealing with elders. Much is said without uttering a word.

G) Oral tradition:

Rather than being mutually exclusive as they might appear at first glance, orality and literacy are part of a continuum of language use, "different channels of discourse" which both occur in everyday language use (Tannen, 1982). Literacy events are also present in oral cultures, taking the form of physical gestures, visuals²⁶ and vocal inflections (Goody & Watt, 1968). "The earliest written documents, even in Europe, became an artifactual support, not a replacement, for oral authority and

²⁶An example of a Peruvian artifact that served as visual support for oral storytelling was the *quipu*, a knotted memory cord.

oral ways of thinking” (Myers, 1996, p. 28).

In the past, Alaskan girls often engaged in the practice of “storyknifing”, in which oral stories were created with accompanying symbols scraped in mud or snow. Stories were illustrated using pictures, as well as their own symbol system for the cooperative writing of their stories (DeMarrais et al., 1992). Symbols changed between villages, as well as between generations in the same locale. As younger children observed the girls using symbols to represent their spoken language, they had practice in sound-symbol relationships of the language, a practice which may have prepared younger children for the literate world of formal schooling.

Inuit culture of the past was rich in oral tradition. Whether telling stories and legends around the seal oil lamp or sharing songs and prayers in drum dancing, values and skills were taught and history passed from one generation to the next. Yet what was communicated was more than factual knowledge: it was an expression of the relationship between listener and story-teller. In the oral tradition the message is “alive and moving”; writing, on the other hand, is a static, one-way communication where the story is “stuck between the pages in a book” (Meade, 1990, p. 230). For the Inuit, the spoken word is powerful and revered. When thoughts are coupled with the spoken word, the thought becomes reality and possesses the power to change the world (Qitsualik, 1999).

After the forced relocation of families into communities during the 1940s and 50s, the legacy of stories was almost lost. Tookoome (1999) explains it in terms of a new phenomenon – house walls: “I do not like having so many rooms... Now my

children do not learn my thoughts or my stories. We do not talk as we would have on the land, in the igloo..." (p. 53). Oral tradition of the past was aimed at strengthening family life and, according to some, there would be less social problems if this story telling were practised more (Northwest Territories Education, Culture & Employment, 1996).

Oral tradition is a medium of expression that is not greatly appreciated by literate cultures, who relegate oral storytelling to the realm of children's entertainment. Within Inuit circles storytelling was indeed used for entertainment purposes, but was also a valuable resource for education. Stories "represent the cultural memory and imaginative history of the community. They encode the values considered important for survival" (Seidelman & Turner, 1993, p. 14). Within Indigenous circles storytelling is considered a performance art, often accompanied by sound effects, physical animation and a sense of drama. It is believed that a story loses its transforming power when the words are "trapped" on the page, separated from visual and auditory components. In addition, reducing a story to marks on a page results in a critical loss in the relationship between storyteller and listener, between "author" and "reader."

REFLECTIONS:

Although the concept of literacy may seem innocent enough at first glance, at its heart lie issues of power (Street, 1993; Stuckey, 1991; Gee, 1990; Freire, 1970). In his writing, Street describes Anglo-American marginalization of Indigenous literacies

as a practice begun by early colonizers and one which continues today. Regarded as illiterate, Aboriginal peoples were presumed incapable of abstract thought and “less able to reflect upon the nature of the language they use or the sources of their political oppression” (1995, p. 21).

I realize after spending time in graduate studies and in Nunavut, that I had grown up steeped in various assumptions regarding schooling and the subject of literacy. Underpinning my own culture – white, Eurocentric, middle class – is the literacy myth of which Graff spoke. Through acquiring the correct literacy it was deemed possible to carve out a successful, happy life. Perhaps the idea was never overtly discussed around the supper table or within the classrooms I had been part of, but its presence was real nonetheless: no matter the starting point of one’s life, literacy held the key to self-improvement and prosperity. By being “at home” in school literacy, doors to higher education would open, offering increased employment possibilities and opportunities for upward social mobility. All this would ultimately lead to being a happier, better citizen. According to Graff, then, my early education had been largely informed by a false premise. The hard-work ethic in which I had been immersed had suddenly been called into question.

Looking back over the years, I realize now that I operated from a narrow definition of literacy, namely proficiency at reading and writing. Having been insulated against contact with most other cultures, I had no idea that there were alternative learning styles or ways of making meaning. Not until I came face-to-face with another culture did I begin to question “the way things had always been”.

The history of literacy and literacy education has had a checkered past. As literacy was viewed as potentially dangerous in the hands of just anyone, political and educational authorities sought to curtail access to it. This was reflected in the practices of the nineteenth century, in which slaves were forbidden to read or write and teaching them to do so was punished. On the Canadian scene, residential schools became the guardians of literacy for Aboriginal children: English was the only language to be used, and reference to Indigenous culture and community literacies was not tolerated. Formal schooling became the instrument for privileging certain forms of literacies while demeaning others.

Such hegemonic views of literacy dismiss the cultures of vast numbers of people whose worldview varies from that of the mainstream. Never a neutral activity, literacy is politically charged with the agenda of others, evidenced by a passive disregard for other literacies as well as an active attempt to push our “correct” views on the rest of the world. “The most striking continuity in the history of literacy is the way in which literacy has been used, in age after age, to solidify the social hierarchy, empower elites and ensure that people lower on the hierarchy accept the values, norms and beliefs of the elites...” (p. 40). Far from being a means of liberation, literacy education has been used as a tool to control the masses, ready them for demeaning factory work, and assimilate language patterns to that of the ruling culture (Street, 1990; Gee, 1990). Suddenly the whole idea of education is cast in a different light.

An excerpt from James Paul Gee’s writing caught my eye and gave me food

for thought:

A text, whether written on paper, or on the soul (Plato), or on the world (Freire), is a loaded weapon. The person, the educator, who hands over the gun, hands over the bullets (the perspective) and must own up to the consequences... Literacy education is not for the timid. (1990, p. 42)

Was I aware of the extremely political nature of literacy skills while tutoring my Inuit students? Was I indeed part of the assimilation process in leading the small group reading lessons? In passing along decoding skills and tips for comprehension, I felt I was giving my young charges building blocks for a better future – enabling them to have easier access to two worlds: their Inuit heritage, as well as the dominant Canadian language and culture. But ammunition ...?

Freire (1970) recognized the dangerous political side of literacy. His efforts to teach reading and writing skills to Brazilian peasants stemmed from his belief that literacy held within its reach the possibilities for social change. The passive reception of skills was not to be the goal of literacy education, but rather the raising of consciousness or “problematizing” of social reality: reading the word and reading the world, with the aim of rescripting it. By supplying the masses with merely “functional literacy” skills, people were groomed by the elite for low-paying jobs and demeaning work. The ability to question the status quo, however, was not a desired outcome in having the peasants learn to read and write, and Freire’s ideas of emancipatory literacy would earn him time in Brazilian jails.

Delpit, too, sees literacy as a powerful tool and an essential component of minority students’ education. Without acknowledging the existence of a culture of

power and overtly teaching the “rules of the game”, people presently outside of the dominant culture are less likely to gain access to it. A critical step in the journey toward a more just society requires educating students about existing participation codes in mainstream society, especially regarding the arbitrary and power-entrenched nature of such codes (Delpit, 1988).

It is the wish of most parents – both Inuit parents with whom I spoke and Afro-American parents referred to by Delpit – that their children be able to access the culture of power to ensure that their voices are heard, something which requires a facility with the discourse patterns of the mainstream and its symbolic capital (Kalantzis, 1997).

Throughout history mainstream culture has valued its own definitions of literacy and marginalized all other viewpoints. Indigenous peoples had for thousands of years made sense of their world through alternate means, yet were found lacking by colonizers. The message of their inferior literacy status was internalized by many Inuit: “We were stupid. We should have thought of writing on sealskins” (Pitseolak, 1977, p. 2). How can centuries of white ethnocentrism be counteracted in my classroom? Is it even possible?

Literacy programs that have been thrust upon other cultures are often ineffectual, and even experience resistance (Rogers, 2001). Rather than displaying an ineptitude for reading and writing, such resistance may be in effect an attempt to preserve one’s cultural heritage. “We, as English teachers, like other print authorities, are always eroding some of the power of local, oral cultures, when we teach print

literacy, and we should expect from our students a resistance similar to that of our forebears” (Myers, 1996, p. 31). Perhaps this was at the heart of much of the reading problems I encountered in Nunavut classrooms.

In a study of literacy in Navajo homes, Hartle-Schutte (1993) found children had been exposed to many experiences of literacy prior to attending school, none of which were recognized or built upon by educational systems because of the narrow definitions of what constitutes literacy. Although the history of written language may not be long, there is nonetheless a rich heritage of literacy experiences (Byrd, 1997). Instead of regarding students as passive recipients to a set of decontextualized skills, they should rather be seen as creators and subjects of meaning-making, building upon pre-existing local literacies (Street, 2001; Vandergrift, 1995). “As literacy educators, by recognizing the role of multiple sign systems in literacy learning, we do not diminish the value of reading and writing, but rather we encourage and legitimize the varied ways of knowing of *all* students” (Noll, 2000, p. 226).

This is my task as educator: not to replace alternative literacies, but to enhance them and build upon them, and to familiarize students to the dominant literacy, enabling them to gain access to the symbolic capital of the ruling culture.

Inuksuk

Who
fashioned you?
For what reason?
What hidden message
do you hold?

How long have you braved the fierce Arctic wind and ice
Holding out your arms beseeching revealing some concealed truth?
Caribou migration Fishing hole Directions home
Mute messenger silent sentinel
Decorating Nunavut's flag
and dotting her landscape

Stone upon irregular stone
Perched precariously atop a distant hill
Highway sign of the Territory
Traveller's friend "Like a man"

Through countless
generations of the past
and untold ones yet to come
The Message waits . . .

– D. Harder (2003)

CONCLUSION

In scanning my journalling of the year, I am struck by the number of times I mention the need for “a new set of eyes” through which to view my new surroundings. Marcel Proust’s famous quote comes to mind: “The real voyage of discovery consists not in seeking new landscapes but in having new eyes.” Although I had viewed a sunrise on hundreds of prior occasions, the one I witnessed after months of night in Nunavut will stand out forever in my memory:

The Return

School door flung open
into the frigid February day
We gather on the doorstep, sandwiches in hand,
To welcome a returning hero.

The ball of fire seems so distant...
Incapable of radiating any warmth
to our frozen world.

The light it sheds today is minimal –
Blocked by swirling clouds
and ice crystals

Yet we gather, seeking a sign in the sky
A tiny pink orb suspended in air for but a few minutes
So low on the horizon,
not yet fully freed
from its prison below the earth's surface

And now it returns to the depths from which it came.

... But we return to our work with a brisker stride.

However briefly,
we have witnessed a sure sign:
After the long winter night
comes a glimmer of hope
Faith that brighter, warmer days are surely coming.

The worst is past ... Spring will come.

– D. Harder (2000)

Like other sojourners, I experienced a two-fold journey of discovery: both the viewing of a completely new landscape and the re-viewing of my familiar and taken-for-granted cultural landscape. Even though home was far removed, the newness of my environment served to thrust my frame of reference into sharper focus and I was able to look critically at some of the personal and pedagogical assumptions that I had brought with me.

It has been a lengthy process: four years of teaching, living and reflecting on the experience. Although there are still many unresolved issues, there have been certain moments of illumination and a few insights uncovered. Following is a brief summary.

GUIDELINES FOR TEACHING IN ANOTHER CULTURE:

If current demographic trends continue in this province, nearly one-half of students in the next 12 years will be of Aboriginal descent (McCreary, 2004). Euro-Canadian teachers will increasingly find themselves in the minority in classrooms reflecting a broad range of languages and cultures (Glasgow, 1994). Becoming comfortable with diversity is of critical importance to future Saskatchewan educators.

In order to be better equipped to deal with cultural diversity in the classroom, teachers need to begin by becoming more aware of their own culture (Samovar et al., 1981). We tend to be ignorant of our own patterns of thought and behaviour, never questioning why we act and believe the things we do: "It is a function of the cultural bondage we all share that we forget our own culture" (p. 64).

Teachers often berate parents of another culture for their seeming indifference toward their children's schooling. Parents' views on child-rearing and the educational process in general are often vastly different from those of mainstream teachers. Many societies place higher value on family ties than on formal education (Valdes, 1996), a belief that was often expressed during my stay in Nunavut. Instead of finding fault with parents, teachers and administrators would be wise to seek their guidance in determining the directions their children's education should take (Delpit, 1995; Vaudrin, 1974). It is incumbent on teachers to work toward understanding the parents' point of view, rather than dismiss them as apathetic or uncaring.

While in Nunavut, I found myself in a perpetual state of altering teaching styles and strategies in order to improve the school experiences of the Inuit students with whom I worked. The following are a few guidelines that I either encountered in my readings, gleaned from discussion with other teachers, or perhaps concocted on my own.

- Model the belief that teachers are co-learners with students. Seeing the teacher as co-learner rather than the expert frees students to join in the mutual task of discovery. Certainly in cross-cultural environments this becomes especially important, where it is the students who possess the knowledge of their culture. Why not turn the tables completely, and have students become the teachers, researching and presenting their knowledge to their uninformed white teachers?
- Share control (Tierney, 1992). Allow student input into routines and

classroom activities which impact them. Aim for an atmosphere with less teacher-control, yet without compromising learning conditions for other students. “The ability to withdraw themselves more often from centre-stage and from control in the classroom provides evidence of great teacher competence and expertise. Working with minority children, it is often more than a skill; it is an act of cultural fairness” (Corson, 1992, p. 490).

- Build in more peer-led activities in the classroom. Reduce the amount of teacher lecture time and avoid the spotlighting of individual students through questioning. Allow Aboriginal students the opportunity to “co-narrate” and expand on one another’s ideas in a non-threatening environment (Ward, 1992). Refrain from correcting students in public, allowing them a measure of privacy and personal dignity (Cazden, 1988). Spend more time with individual students and small groups. Allow sufficient practice time before expecting student performance, or let children volunteer for class contributions. In seeking to relax the “teacher grip” in novel study groups, I attempted to fade into the background and allow students to help one another out when a word was incorrectly decoded. Students would decide when (or if) they would like to read aloud, and I offered help only when requested. In addition, literature circle roles allowed for more student leadership and less teacher intervention.
- Provide a variety of means for student response to information, in light of Indigenous preferences for the visual and concrete. Regardless of the culture,

- a wide variety of response activities is desirable, addressing visual, aural and kinesthetic learning styles. Rather than having instructions pertaining mainly to reading and writing, “make, draw, role-play or create” might be more welcomed and provide a better learning experience for many students.
- Attempt to relate lessons to the land and students’ experiences with it. There remains an intimate bond between the Inuit and nature; I have seen even the youngest of faces light up when speaking of “the land”. Ask students about their hunting experiences or make some reference to the outdoors, and you have their undivided attention and interest. Encourage students to carry over their abilities to read and predict nature into all subject areas (i.e. cause and effect relationships). Tap into students’ “Funds of Knowledge” (Moll, 1992) by affirming the abilities children bring to school, and build on “the brilliance that students bring with them ‘in their blood’” (Delpit, 1995, p. 182).
 - Incorporate family and community experiences into school activities: classroom events, school cultural days, and invitations to elders to be regular and welcomed visitors. This gives education a more holistic flavour and reinforces Aboriginal respect for family and culture. By taking an active role within community life and by communicating their desire to be partners in learning, teachers demonstrate that knowledge is a resource to be jointly acquired and celebrated (Stairs, 1995; Swisher & Deyhle, 1989).
 - Help students make connections with prior learning. Although important in any culture, this is critical among Indigenous cultures such as the Inuit. While

materials may be printed in the same country, it may seem to students to be worlds away. Often what is represented has nothing to do with their life experience in a remote northern community, and students need guidance in making a connection with their reading. As teachers it is our task to supply background information, find links with which they can identify, or somehow pique their interest into something novel and unfamiliar.

- Adjust the pace of the classroom to fit the students' comfort zone (Collier, 1979). Aim to break free from the sometimes frantic pace within the classroom and seize the teachable moments as they arise. (i.e. Be flexible: give yourself the freedom to pitch lesson plans when the situation warrants it.)
- Allow more time for silence (Erickson & Mohatt, 1982). See it as more than empty space. Become more comfortable in its presence and allow it to be used as a tool for students to explore, examine and discover. Be aware of nonverbal cues and what is being communicated without words.
- Educate students in the "culture of power" (Delpit, 1988). Without knowing the rules of the game, students will not be able to succeed in setting their own courses. By fostering critical thinking skills, teachers can offer more empowering education where "conditions are created that allow the transformation of students' potential power into actual power" (Ghosh, 1996, p. 8). Admittedly this requires many years to achieve, but small steps can be taken in individual classes by asking some of life's big questions, and

demonstrating the critical eye with which to view the world.

- Model appropriate behaviour for students. “Forgive and remember”²⁷
(Racette, 2000). Foster mutual respect and a desire to learn from others.
Although hardly unique to Aboriginal education, it is a critical component of the cross-cultural classroom.
- Affirm students’ own culture at every opportunity, and seek to inspire pride in their roots. Contrary to assimilationist views where it was assumed that the white man’s culture was more conducive to learning, research has shown that a strong Aboriginal identity leads to more successful school experiences (Deyhle, 1995, 1992; Deyhle & Margonis, 1995). Rather than being “colour-blind”, teachers are encouraged to acknowledge and validate children’s differing races and cultures. Ignoring difference and treating it as if it were invisible communicates to students that their heritage is inconsequential and not worthy of notice (Delpit, 1995). Teachers who show a genuine interest in learning more of Aboriginal culture convey to students that they possess something of value. Encouraging students to share sewing or hunting skills, their traditions and language, builds student self-esteem and pride in their heritage. It seemed to bring great satisfaction to my students to hear my attempts at Inuktitut phrases, and they loved being able to offer correction on my pronunciation. Be willing, too, to sample the culinary novelties – muktuk, seal, caribou, etc – and so seek to identify with students’ tastes and ways of

²⁷ “Forgive and Remember”: See p. 75 for background information on this phrase.

life.

Few Canadians, it seems are aware of the unique educational challenges facing Aboriginal peoples today. Mainstream society has made many false assumptions about other cultures' needs, and so has missed the mark when it comes to meeting the needs of Indigenous peoples. As part of the dominant culture, we are the ones in need of educating, that we might more fully understand and appreciate the situation of First Nations Canadians.

WAS I ABLE TO REWRITE THE SCRIPT OF MY "FIGURED WORLD"?

The script I was handed in the Inuit junior high classroom depicted whites as power-grabbing, money-hungry colonizers who have no use for viewpoints other than their own. Their educational agenda was portrayed as a continuation of domination and assimilation within the classroom, where mainstream values were forced upon a conquered people. The script I wished to substitute for it was one in which the two cultures dealt respectfully with each other, with equal access to life goals and opportunities for fulfillment. This, however, was not to occur.

There wasn't nearly enough time to do the work necessary to rescript my figured world. When I boarded the plane to return home, I was just beginning to understand what was involved in becoming the kind of teacher these students needed. Brief though it was, my experience as part of an Inuit hamlet served as a starting point to a personal and professional metamorphosis:

... a profound transformation of the attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors of teachers concerning the nature of learning and intelligence, the role of

diversity in learning, and in fact, the ideological stance or world view they may have in general. The process of transformation is a personal and collective journey that teachers must travel. (Nieto, 1999, p. 131)

Although teachers may feel powerless to effect change in the sometimes desperate educational settings we find ourselves in, this personal journey of re-evaluation is one within the grasp of each of us. My year-long immersion experience was only the first step in a journey that will continue for the remainder of my career.

As members of the dominant society, we have a need to rectify the injustices of the past (or take steps in that direction) in order to rewrite inter-cultural relationships. Problems are certainly too deep-seated for one teacher to address in so short a period of time. Perhaps such rescripting is an impossible feat no matter what the time frame or number of people involved, but I am convinced it is the path we must journey upon. Perhaps the transformation of which Nieto speaks is one which can only be realized one teacher at a time.

DID I MAKE A DIFFERENCE?

My purpose in teaching in the Arctic was to have a positive impact, to be a part of the “solution” to problems facing Inuit students in this tiny hamlet. Brody’s writing (1991), however, implicates southern whites for contributing to, rather than alleviating, the poverty and despair in the North. His description of Southerners venturing north reflects much the same “figured world” that I experienced in the classroom: thinking only of themselves, non-Inuit are ready to exploit the resources of the North for their own purposes. At best, their intent is a misguided mission that

further colonizes the people of the Arctic: "Each White justifies his own work by referring to the benefits, medical, moral, intellectual or material, that southern culture can give" (p. 116).

My initial reaction was one of vehement disagreement with Brody's point of view, arguing that my aim was only one of helping, not domination. But in the months that followed, I have come to see that there are no easy solutions for the Inuit, and that control of modern education continues to rest largely in the hands of non-Inuit Southerners like myself. It was from a position of privilege that I ventured forth; perhaps Brody was right and it was arrogant to presume I could be of assistance to those of another culture.

The temporary stay of the majority of mainstream teachers is a source of frustration to many of the permanent residents in remote communities. Comments I heard from both Nunavut students and parents reflected their disdain for the ever-changing roster of teachers, who would remain only a short time in their community and were only too anxious to leave. Perhaps, in the long run, it would be better if we Whites remained at home, and allowed the Inuit to determine their own educational future. Perhaps, as Brody suggested, I did form part of the problems that faced these Indigenous peoples. Perhaps my best intentions were not enough to make any difference at all...

In the grand scheme of things, the tiny hamlet I was part of for one school year will bear no lasting mark from my presence, but perhaps there have been some small benefits in the lives of a few individual students – the boys whose decoding

and comprehension skills increased by two grade levels; the teenager who learned how to make correct change for groceries; the young girls who would flock around our house, eager to visit and share the events of their day... Though I was only one of many passing through their community, I believe I did make some small contribution to their world. Whatever the case, I know they have had a profound impact on me, both personally and professionally.

HOW HAS THIS EXPERIENCE IMPACTED MY FUTURE TEACHING?

The lessons learned during my stay in the Arctic are sometimes difficult to remember. They have become submerged beneath the stacks of curriculum guidelines, unit plans and piles of marking that demand my attention in classrooms of the present. The temptation is to fall back into old patterns, as my current situation finds me thrust back into the mainstream: caucasian, middle-class, English-speaking Canada.

Although the bulk of my Arctic treasures, memorabilia and lesson plans has been relegated to a plastic tub in the storage room, they are regularly revisited and appreciated anew. Similarly, the insights gleaned from that year are still carried with me, even though not visibly apparent. I have brought a newfound awareness back to mainstream Canada where many of the same needs exist, although perhaps not so blatantly obvious: children, whether white or Inuit, need food in their stomachs to function well; students are unique individuals who need a variety of modes of learning and evaluation; minority children have a great deal to share and to teach us,

even though we seem oblivious to what they have to offer. I have returned with altered views of what is important in education, and with the realization that our ways are not necessarily the best ways. I discovered that classroom routines as I had previously experienced them were not the only vehicles to learning. Neither were my personal educational goals valid for everyone: there exist other aims and definitions of success, alternate reasons for pursuing knowledge, and diverse avenues of instruction.

One event in particular stands out for me in my journey to meaning-making. It serves not only to give direction in working with students from another culture, but offers encouragement to continue in spite of obstacles along the path. Betty McKenna, an elder from Opaswayuk, Manitoba, addressed an auditorium filled primarily with White teachers at a Regina convention. In keeping with the Native tradition of teaching through stories, McKenna shared the following:

Nanabush and his friend had been invited to a great feast. His friend was anxious, however, feeling he wasn't appropriately dressed for such a fine occasion. He approached one animal after another, asking for help, until he had acquired Nanabush's braids, the antlers of a moose, a beaver's tail, and the feathered wings of a bird. Now, at last, he felt he was ready to attend the feast.

He decided he would surprise Nanabush with his new appearance. Much to his dismay, Nanabush became frightened and fled, thinking a monster had swallowed his old friend. The faster the "monster" ran, the further away he drove Nanabush. Finally the friend tore off the animal features and called out to Nanabush, who was very glad to see his friend had been able to escape from the monster. Clad simply as they were, the two set out together to attend the great feast.

McKenna explained that the friend represented the spirit of fear and discontent: afraid that he was not worthy of the feast as he was, he sought to make

himself more acceptable. Continuing the analogy, she said we, as teachers of Aboriginal children, may feel ill-equipped and frantically seek out some magical formula to meet the challenges we face. We need, however, only come and learn from the elders and from the students themselves. The Aboriginal communities await us, and long to share their wisdom with us. We needn't be fearful, only willing to learn.

BRICOLAGE (REPRISE):

What does the bricolage which I sought to create now look like?

I envision it with textures both rough and durable – fox fur, muskox wool and caribou hide – as well as fine and delicate – fibres spun from the Arctic cotton that dot summer's landscape. A combination of light and dark threads intertwine throughout. The bright colours reflect the dazzling midnight sun glaring off May snow cover, and the hope of a brighter future for Canada's Inuit. The sombre shades represent the long Arctic winter night, as well as colonial abuses of the past and the present injustices faced by Aboriginal peoples.

Snapshots of the landscape dot this memory quilt – ice and snow, seal and polar bear – signifying the ferocity of nature and the Inuit love for the land. Adjacent are delicate spring flowers blooming among the rocks, images of the fragile beauty of the Arctic.

In the distance stands an ancient inuksuk, serving as messenger and guide to those seeking direction, as well as a drum dancer who bears witness to the

importance of traditional Inuit wisdom.

In the background is a twin-engine plane, a symbol of encroaching white values and culture. Although realistically occupying a more dominant position in the tapestry of modern Inuit life, it is my hope that eventually the voices from the South will become more muted and less of a determining factor of life in the North.

A child's fur-encircled face takes central position in this bricolage. Nunavut is a territory yet in its infancy, and it must continue to grow and find its place in the world of the future. The Inuit population is a youthful one, and the children are the ones who hold the key to Nunavut's future. It is the children with whom I worked that leave an indelible mark on my teaching career.

And so the bricolage becomes a juxtaposition of contrasting ideas, a tension between light and darkness, strength and fragility, the past and the future, pain and hope. Would that I were an artist, and could actually create such a piece!

WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE?

Following are a few ideas for practical application and personal teaching goals:

- ◆ Increase the cultural awareness of pre-service teachers, whether or not they plan to teach in another culture. At some point they will most certainly find themselves with students from backgrounds other than their own. Future teachers within the dominant culture need to critically examine their own culture and the hidden assumptions that are carried with it.
- ◆ There is a critical need for ongoing dialogue with Canada's Aboriginal

peoples regarding the colonization of the past and a future vision of how to peacefully coexist, including enabling First Nations to determine how best to educate their young people.

- ◆ In my own continuing professional journey, I would like to incorporate into my teaching more of the alternative methods which research shows to be most welcomed within Aboriginal circles. There are, no doubt, many students in my present classes that would feel more comfortable with increased options in classroom procedures and routines. In addition, I would like to invest some time in becoming better acquainted with students' lives outside of school (via extra-curricular activities, and as spectator at their sporting events), and so gain a glimpse of their strengths and talents in another setting. This might be difficult to realize, as I deal with more than 400 students in the role of Teacher-Librarian and Core French Teacher, but I could perhaps make some small beginning in this direction.
- ◆ I would like to further explore non-traditional literacies: the visual literacies of semiotics and kinesics; ecological literacy (an area in which I am personally lacking); and, at the opposite end of the language continuum, orality, which could enhance Native studies programs throughout the grades. Without a classroom of my own, I am somewhat limited in my opportunities for experimentation; I could perhaps begin with the library resources I now have – i.e. books, guest speakers, etc. – as a means of introducing these new ideas to the students with whom I work.

- ◆ One of my aims as Core French teacher has been to expose students to alternate cultures and worldviews, and of course, a language other than the one they are familiar with. Through trips to Quebec, some students have had the opportunity to expand their WASP cultural horizons. Armed now with the insights gained through this Arctic sojourn, I have renewed energy and enthusiasm for challenging mainstream students to embark on the same journey I did – if not a physical journey, then an introspective one: to venture beyond their familiar, comfortable circles, to appreciate life from another's frame of reference, and to aim to be wise and sensitive citizens within the global village.

PACKING MY BAGS:

As the time for leave-taking approached, I found myself revisiting various events, viewing them this time through a lens with a different focus. My year with the Inuit people had been for me an immersion course in new ways of looking at the world.

October 11th: Thanksgiving Day 1999

"The Neighbourhood":

Behind our house lies a discarded mattress, grass growing through it in spots. Beside it lies a pile of lumber from an old barge shipment (once a crate used for shipping, now in a dozen pieces). In the yard diagonal to ours sits an old, discarded vinyl dentist's chair, looking like a veteran of the 70's era. Although always in a ready position to receive a new "patient", there are no takers.

Beside us is a relatively new looking truck with 4 flat tires, a used diaper rolled up beside its front wheel. (It's been there since my arrival, my guess is that it'll probably still be there after the snow melts.) A boat has recently been parked in the back, now that the bay is frozen. Another truck sits in the front yard on oversized mag wheels.

Across the way is a large pond with garbage strewn on the shoreline. Some kind of greenish algae floats in the water - not very appealing. For the last two weeks or so, it has been frozen. Now it appears much cleaner, covered as it is in a blanket of snow, while kids play hockey by day, and Hondas spin circles on the ice by night.

Each house has its own oil barrel garbage can parked immediately in front of it, which has been uniquely "decorated" with a hand-painted slogan:

- * Garbage Here*
- * Be My Baby Tonight*
- * Your Town, Our Town, Your Mess ...*

*There each one sits, like some kind of lawn ornament, minus the lawn.
I'm glad my mother isn't here to see my new neighbourhood...*

Yards here are certainly different from that of my parents, where every tree and blade of grass was neatly manicured and a delight to the eyes. I've come to realize that up here where there is no Canadian Tire across town, one has to keep spare parts, lumber and "junk" nearby; you never know when it might come in handy. The story is told of the time the only water truck in town went on the fritz. Hamlet workers rummaged through a discarded truck skeleton that had been abandoned outside of town. From it they were able to salvage enough metal to return the water truck into functioning mode, and the hamlet's water supply was again assured. There just might be good reason to never totally discard anything...

These months have enabled me to change lenses and perhaps catch a glimpse into the Inuit vantage point. A spartan bit of beauty in harsh surroundings... the intricate pattern created by the wind in a snowdrift ... a child's runny nose and smiling brown eyes framed by a circle of fur... the magnificent beauty of a full moon on a frozen bay... the warm hospitality of an Inuit host... the memory of an elderly woman confined to a wheelchair who, though we couldn't speak each other's language, communicated volumes as she kissed my hand...

A perfect world it isn't. Just as my own culture has its ugly side, there are deep set problems here "on top of the world" as well. But there is much beauty to behold for those with the eyes to see it.

POLARIS:

I have fond memories of star-gazing with my dad on crisp Alberta winter evenings as we returned from our weekly trek to music lessons. We would pause in the yard while Dad pointed out the constellations that adorned the prairie sky. Casseiopeia, Orion, Pleiades, Ursa Major and Minor, Venus, the Evening Star – all became familiar friends in the night sky. Although their locations changed with the seasons, there was one constant on the black velvet dome. The North Star could be counted upon to remain loyal to its place, serving as sentinel and guidepost to the earth below.

All that changed in the Arctic. It became difficult to find the familiar constellations in what seemed to be a new sky. Even the constant Polaris was not where it should have been. One December night an Inuk friend guided me over the frozen bay, and served as astronomy interpreter for me. Instead of in its familiar position, the North Star was suspended directly overhead. The most comfortable position from which to view it was flat on my back, gazing straight up at a 90 degree angle.

Polaris hadn't disappeared, it had just shifted slightly, thus requiring a new vantage point from which to view the sky. Although the sky map had been altered, with readjusted bearings the familiar constellations became recognizable once again.

Similarly, my views of education and teaching methods which once seemed to be constant and permanently fixed, took a sudden shift in the new milieu in which I found myself. The beliefs and values upon which I had founded my educational

practices could no longer be counted upon to point me in the right direction. A lengthy and sometimes painful re-examination of what had been previously taken for granted, eventually made the new setting less confusing and helped bring things into focus once again.

Pijariqpunga²⁸

²⁸In Inuit tradition, a speaker has the floor for as long as is required. Using this Inuktitut term signifies that the speaker has said all that he/she wished to say, and it is another's turn to speak.

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Websites:

<http://www.kilimwomen.com/aboutkilim.html> [Accessed March 7, 2003.]

APPENDIX



**UNIVERSITY OF SASKATCHEWAN
BEHAVIOURAL RESEARCH ETHICS BOARD**

<http://www.usask.ca/research/ethics.shtml>

NAME: Linda Wason-Ellam (Dorothy Harder)
Curriculum Studies

BSC#: 03-1172

DATE: September 22, 2003

The University of Saskatchewan Behavioural Research Ethics Board has reviewed the Application for Ethics Approval for your study "Artic Sojourn: A Teacher's Reflections" (03-1172).

1. Your study has been APPROVED.
2. Any significant changes to your proposed method, or your consent and recruitment procedures should be reported to the Chair for Committee consideration in advance of its implementation.
3. The term of this approval is for 5 years.
4. This approval is valid for five years on the condition that a status report form is submitted annually to the Chair of the Committee. This certificate will automatically be invalidated if a status report form is not received within one month of the anniversary date. Please refer to the website for further instructions: <http://www.usask.ca/research/behavrsc.shtml>

I wish you a successful and informative study.

Dr. David Hay, Acting Chair
University of Saskatchewan
Behavioural Research Ethics Board

DH/ck